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NORTHEAST INDIA AND INDIA'S ACT EAST POLICY

IDENTIFYING THE PRIORITIES

Edited by
M. Amarjeet Singh

Northeast India and India's Act East Policy

This book offers an understanding of the expectations and challenges of Northeast India in the context of India’s Act East policy. It critically examines how the policy is being pursued by the incumbent Bharatiya Janata Party-led central government and analyses its relevance from local perspectives.

Contributors to the book provide an examination of the differences between Look East and Act East policy and explanations of the expectations of India’s neighbouring countries, particularly Myanmar, towards Northeast India. They ask the following questions: a) What is to be done to integrate India’s Northeast region meaningfully into the Act East policy? What is the motive of linking this policy with these states? How is this policy received by the local communities? b) What are the challenges of the Northeast region? What are their needs and priorities? How can these states showcase their potentials to Southeast Asia and East Asia? c) What is the significance of the changes from Look to Act East Policy? Has the regime change affected the continuity in the policy? What are the short- and long-term goals? d) What are the expectations of Southeast Asia and East Asia? By addressing these questions, they bridge the knowledge gaps that exist in the understating of the Northeast region of India vis-à-vis the Act East policy.

The first book to combine a balanced view of India’s Act East policy and Northeast India, it will be of interest to policy makers and academics in the fields of Development Studies, International Relations, Northeast India and South Asian Politics.

M. Amarjeet Singh is Professor at the Centre for North East Studies and Policy Research, Jamia Millia Islamia (A Central University), India, where he teaches courses on social conflict, and society and politics of India’s Northeast. His research interest focuses on conflict studies, identity politics, and migration studies. His previous publications include the co-edited book *Identity, Contestation and Development in Northeast India* (Routledge India, 2015).

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Northeast India and India's Act East Policy

Identifying the Priorities

Edited by M. Amarjeet Singh

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Preface

A two-day conference on ‘India’s Act East Policy: Needs and Priorities of Northeast India and Myanmar’ was organised by the Centre for North East Studies and Policy Research, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi in collaboration with the Nehru Memorial Museum & Library, New Delhi during 12–13 March 2018. The conference drew participation by scholars and students from within India and abroad.

The funding for the conference was made available from a generous grant from the North Eastern Council, Government of India, meant for the ‘Upgradation of Centre for North East Studies and Policy Research, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi’.

This book is not the proceedings of said conference, as I have not selected all the papers presented. The chapters were selected after a lengthy internal reading and external refereeing. I am thankful to all the contributors for their patience, and also to the two unknown academic reviewers for bringing so much joy to me.

The book, consisting of 12 chapters, excluding the introductory chapter, hopes to bridge the knowledge deficit that exists in our understanding of the Northeast region of India vis-à-vis the Act East policy. Much has been discussed and written about this policy and its relevance in the context of Northeast India. However, the existing academic and activist writings seldom spell out the priorities of different states of the region, and how the policy is being pursued by the present government of the country. Thus, in this book, an attempt has been made to answer several critical questions: what should be done to achieve the desired goal? What are the specific needs and priorities of different states of the region? How can the region showcase its potentials? What are the challenges? What is the significance of the change from Look to Act East policy? Is it merely changing nomenclature? What are the short- and long-term goals of the policy? Various chapters in this book attempt to answer these questions.

At Jamia Millia Islamia, I am indebted to Prof. Talat Ahmad, the then Vice-Chancellor; Mr. A.P. Siddiqui, the Registrar; Dr. Abdul Malik, Joint Registrar; and Prof. Simi Malhotra, Director, Centre for North East Studies and Policy Research for their support in the organisation of the conference.

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Furthermore, I am especially indebted to Dr. Jagannath P. Panda of the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi; and to Routledge, UK especially to Ms. Dorothea Schaefter, Senior Editor, Asian Studies, and Ms. Alexandra de Brauw, Editorial Assistant, Asian Studies for their support in bringing out this book on time.

In my limited assessment of the present book, some of the chapters offer fresh insights and raise the debate to a new level on the subject.

Prof. M. Amarjeet Singh
New Delhi
28 February 2019

Foreword

Contemporary Asia and its various sub-regions have been undergoing continuous transformation in recent years. These transformations are evident in the foreign policies of major countries, their rising economic influence and more importantly, in their relationships to influence the balance of power in Asia. India, as a growing influential actor, is making numerous changes in its foreign policy while approaching the sub-regions and institutions of Asia to protect and position its interests better in a changing regional environment. India's approach to the immediate neighbouring region of Southeast Asia and towards the ASEAN is one strong reference in this regard.

India's growing association with the countries in Southeast Asia and the ASEAN is one highlighting aspect of New Delhi's Act East policy. The India-ASEAN engagement, which has matured over the years, is today one of the defining features of the Indo-Pacific. In fact, an evolutionary trajectory in the post-Cold War period shows how India has advanced its relationship and engagement with the countries in Southeast Asia through accentuating cultural, commercial and connectivity linkages. It has accorded priority to its strategic partnership with the ASEAN. One distinctive feature of this growing engagement is India's growing physical connection with the ASEAN region, especially between Northeast India and Southeast Asia. This edited volume by Prof. M. Amarjeet Singh on *Northeast India and India's Act East Policy: Identifying the Priorities* brings this aspect to the fore.

Literature on the growing closeness between Northeast India and Southeast Asia is an emerging area of study. Studies on India's Act East policy are plenty, but studies analysing the connection between local regions which could act as a bridge between India and Southeast Asia are still missing. Prof. Singh's edited volume bridges that gap by analysing the understudied aspects in *three* specific accounts.

First, some of the chapters in this volume create a 'local' context for India's Act East policy by establishing a link between Northeast Indian states and Southeast Asia. This local context brings to the fore the significance of physical connectivity that could well become the bridge

between Northeast India and the neighbouring ASEAN region. As the chapters in the volume highlight, this bridge could be established not only through ‘commerce, connectivity and culture’, but also by identifying the borders and bordering regions among India’s Northeastern states and neighbouring countries, such as Myanmar and Bangladesh, for the purpose.

Second, this volume highlights the strategic significance of multi-modal connectivity which is fast becoming the principal feature of India-Southeast Asia engagement. While the India-ASEAN engagement does factor in the primacy of multi-modal connectivity to enhance the strategic partnership, the crux is: how do the two sides implement it? Identifying areas of cooperation, emphasising collaboration of border regions and focusing on economic cooperation will be some ways in which this can be implemented effectively. This volume highlights these aspects at length.

Third, the human aspect of cooperation is another important area that needs to be deliberated upon to draw complementarities and cooperation between Northeast India and Southeast Asia. Ignoring the human resource developmental aspects will inhibit any effective policy cooperation, especially when both Northeast India and Southeast Asia need economic prosperity. This volume builds a greater geographic context for an effective policy cooperation between India and the ASEAN, which must take into account human resource development, and cannot be overlooked.

A volume of this nature brings together varied interpretations of local and trans-national dynamics that are immensely convoluted. One may not necessarily approve or agree with every assessment or policy prescription offered by individual contributors in their respective chapters in this volume. Still, academic literature is meant to offer ideas for consideration and deliberation. This volume provides a fresh ground for thought and effective discussion, both for policymakers and academics.

I compliment Prof. Singh for his insightful perspective on India’s Northeast and the ASEAN region by bringing together diverse perspectives under one academic platform. I wish this volume every success.

Dr Jagannath P. Panda
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Editor and contributors biographies

About the editor

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Introduction

M. Amarjeet Singh Attempts have been made in this book to arrive at understanding the necessary critical measures needed in order to integrate the Northeast of India into the Act East policy. It further tries to trace the patterns of conflict and accommodation between national and local needs. Without overlooking the interests of the stakeholders from the Northeast, the book assesses the practicability of the Act East policy from their perspectives. Thus, the book attempts to go beyond the matrix of looking at the Act East policy just as a straightforward economic engagement between Northeastern states and Southeast Asia –it introspects on the social, political and cultural impact of the policy in the long run.

India has been actively promoting the Look East policy (presently the Act East policy) with the sole aim of promoting political, security, economic and cultural engagement with East and Southeast Asian countries (Ghoshal 2013; Das 2010; Kishan 2009; Sharma 2009). Initially started as a strategic economic engagement policy, the scope of the policy has gradually been expanded to include political, strategic and cultural dimensions. In order to achieve the goal, India has been actively partnering up with several institutional forums, such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC). Overall, the policy is expected to provide immense opportunities for India in general and its Northeast region in particular.

Since the policy has been adopted, India started recognising the strategic importance of Myanmar, since both countries share land as well as the maritime border. By virtue of being the only ASEAN country located adjacent to India, Myanmar is considered a viable ‘land bridge’ or a ‘gateway’ for trade and other activities between India and Southeast Asia. In fact, India started realising Myanmar’s importance in the 1990s in its attempt to foster greater engagement with East and Southeast Asian countries, the rise of China (Ghoshal 2013) and insurgency in the Northeast region (Nath 2004). In doing so, India began extending developmental assistance to Myanmar to undertake various connectivity projects, border

area development and the setting up of institutions for higher learning and public health (Ministry of External Affairs 2017). This is also possible mainly due to the positive political transition occurring in Myanmar after decades of military rule. There is a hope that these initiatives would help further boost bilateral cooperation between the two neighbours, but it still requires extraordinary efforts.

In doing so, Northeast India has found prominence in the government policymaking and well-deserved visibility ‘from a peripheral to the core zone’ (Mahanta 2018). Now, the ‘core zone’ has become an important destination for investment in the infrastructure sector (Mahanta 2018). This has been primarily because of its strategic location between Southeast Asia and South Asia and historic links with those countries, and even more so for its lack of economic development. Thus, the region has been placed ‘at the centre of the discourse on India’s engagement’ with East and Southeast Asian countries (Talukdar 2018). India also recognises that these countries could play a crucial role in the development of the Northeast region of the country (Nath 2004). Keeping this in mind, several development initiatives, including connectivity projects, cultural promotion programmes and bilateral trade, have been launched since the 1990s. As expected, these initiatives have generated a lot of excitement and apprehension (MDONER and NEC 2008; Talukdar 2018; Mahanta 2018).

Figure 1.1 Map of Northeast India
Source: M. Amarjeet Singh

However, concerns have been expressed in academic and activist writings about the possibility of unhindered extraction of natural resources and securitisation of the region due to a large-scale investment boom (Kishan 2009; Sharma 2009; Nath 2004). However, nearly three decades after the policy was launched, we have not seen significant progress towards the implementation of the policy. Having said this, the underlying objectives of the policy are not unachievable. Since its inception, the policy has undergone different phases under successive governments of the country (see Chapter 7). It is therefore important to critically examine how the policy is being pursued by the Bharatiya Janata Party-led government. In addition, it is also necessary to examine the relevance of the policy from the local perspectives (Kishan 2009; Sharma 2009).

What does the Act East policy mean for Northeast India?

Eight Indian states, namely Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura, are jointly known either as Northeast India, Northeast region of India or Northeast (also as NE or NER). Such terms are often used interchangeably to refer to these states among the academic community as well as within the government. The use of these terms have gained popularity over the past few decades, owing to official interventions starting with the setting up of the North Eastern Council, a planning agency, in 1972, and the Ministry of the Development of North Eastern Region, the ministry for 'planning, execution and monitoring of infrastructure projects' of the region, in 2004. The Northeast region is the only region of the country which has a dedicated central ministry (please see the official website of the ministry, http://mdoner.gov.in/ and the council, http://necouncil.gov.in/). But their effectiveness is a matter of debate and examination, although it is not within the purview of the present book.

The region, occupying about eight percent of the country's geographical area, is the home to about four percent of the total population (Census of India 2011; Government of India 2013). Being a hilly, remote and industrially undeveloped area, most of the basic commodities such as food products, medicines and fuels are imported from other parts of the country. The region is also surrounded almost entirely by the countries of Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, Nepal and Myanmar respectively; and hence connected to the rest of the country by a narrow land corridor located between Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal in the border city of Siliguri in West Bengal state. This remote region, being characterised by underdevelopment and isolation, has remained outside the cognisance of the mainstream national life. Relative remoteness, coupled with cultural distinctiveness of the local communities and underdevelopment, has led to the social and political alienation of a significant portion of its populace from the mainstream of national life.

The region is inhabited by a large number of numerically-small indigenous peoples and immigrant communities. A rapid social transformation took place in the region with the advent of British rule in the

19th century as tea plantation, coal mining and oil exploration begun. Thus, the region witnessed large scale immigration comprising of job-seekers and land-seeking farm settlers (Nag 2018). Some of the indigenous peoples have already been officially recognised as the Scheduled Tribes. The indigenous people who are presently designated as the Scheduled Tribes constitute about 27.25 percent of the population of the region, and constitute the majority population in the states of Mizoram, Meghalaya, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh.[1] There are affirmative policies for their welfare in the form of reservations in public employment, political representation and education.

The people of the Northeast region share common historical and cultural links with the borderland people of the neighbouring countries. They are also able to interact more freely across borders (with the exception of the India-China border), although their respective governments have enhanced border security.[2] For example, the Naga people are the inhabitants of the Indian states of Nagaland, Manipur, Assam and Arunachal Pradesh, and also of Sagaing region and Kachin state in Myanmar. Thus, the Chins of Chin state in Myanmar and Mizos of Mizoram in India share common culture and history (see Chapter 12). In addition, we cannot overlook the significance of common historical and cultural links between Bangladesh and India (see Chapter 8).

With the exception of the areas along the India-Bangladesh border, different parts of the border areas are remotely located as well sparsely populated. For instance, the India-Myanmar border region is among the most remote and thinly populated territories, and is marked by limited cross-border economic activities. Development in these areas is taking place at a slower pace than other regions in their respective countries. In the absence of adequate educational opportunities in the Northwest region of Myanmar, their students are allowed to attend schools just across the border in India. The students are allowed to cross the border in the morning and returning back to their country in the evening. This is allowed by the local authorities on humanitarian grounds (Majumdar and Vaiphei 2015). However, the future of such movement would be dependent upon the relationship at the federal level between the two countries, and not merely by the cultural and historical links between the borderland people.

The Northeast region became ever more remote and landlocked after the Partition of British India into India and Pakistan as the transport and

communication via East Pakistan and now Bangladesh came to a grinding halt. For instance, the Bengal-Assam Railway from Guwahati (Assam) to Dhaka (East Pakistan) was disconnected at the Cachar-Sylhet border in 1965. In addition to the displacement of a large number of people who suffered enormous hardships, the Partition adversely affected economic relations between Assam and Bengal. During the pre-Partition period, the Bengal, Assam and Arakan regions together constituted an important economic corridor. The corridor underwent severe setbacks as the flow of goods and people was affected by the Partition. The Partition might have taken Northeast India's economy 'backwards by a quarter of a century', and catching up with rest of the county is a 'hilarious task' (MDONER and NEC 2008, 1). After Partition, the distance between Northeast India and major cities of the country such as Calcutta have increased greatly. However, in a significant boost to connectivity between India and Bangladesh, road transport carrying passengers (bus services) have started between important cities and towns: Dhaka-Calcutta, Dhaka-Agartala, Guwahati-Shillong-Dhaka and Calcutta-Dhaka-Shillong. The Calcutta-Dhaka-Agartala bus service reduces the road distance between Calcutta and Agartala by about 1150 km. Similar services are likely to be expanded, between India and Myanmar in particular, over the coming years.

In Northeast India, the majority of the people live in rural areas where agriculture is their main source of employment and livelihood. However, agriculture is mainly dependent upon monsoons, and most areas are not irrigated. Low foodgrains production is insufficient to meet the local demand. Similarly, manufacturing activities are also almost negligible due to the lack of industrialisation. The tertiary sector, which has grown slightly, is mainly due to the expansion of public administration, with the state governments being the main employers. In most of India's rapidly growing states, such as Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra or Kerala, the agriculture sector is in relative decline as compared to the growth of the manufacturing and tertiary sectors. However, there is little evidence of economic diversification in this part of India. The production of electricity is negligible in the region despite abundant hydroelectricity resource, and the per capita consumption of electricity is much lower than the rest of the country (Government of India 2015; MDONER and NEC 2008).

Table 1.1 Increase in road length due to the Partition of India

From	*To*	*Through Siliguri in West Bengal*	*Through Bangladesh*	*Distance difference (C & D)*
A	*B*	*C*	*D*	*E*
Agartala, the largest city in Tripura	Calcutta, the biggest city in Eastern India and also the capital of West Bengal	1,680	450	1,230
Silchar, one of the largest cities in Assam	Calcutta	1,407	600	807
Guwahati, the largest city in Northeast India and also the capital of Assam	Calcutta	1,081	830	251
Shillong, the capital of the then undivided Assam, and now the capital of Meghalaya	Calcutta	1,181	720	461
Imphal, the largest city in Manipur	Calcutta	1,742	900	842
Aizawl, the largest city in Mizoram	Calcutta	1,657	800	857

Source: Calculated from MDONER and NEC (2008)

On the positive side, most states of the region have high literacy and low infant mortality rates. But, despite these encouraging human development indicators, the region has not been able to build on these strengths and capture its potential. If the literacy rate is high, skill development is a concern. There is also a serious concern for the quality of education. Thus, the high literacy rate has not translated into higher employability. The gap in per capita income between the prosperous parts of the country and the Northeast region shows a steady increase over the years. As a result, the region's population seem to be increasingly excluded from India's economic growth. The region, despite being endowed with rich natural

resources, lags behind other parts of the country (MDONER and NEC 2008).

Due to the relatively remote location, cultural distinctiveness of the Northeast peoples and underdevelopment, the region stands apart from other regions of the country. Many people have not been fully integrated into the mainstream of the national life, and this has manifested in the form of various self-determination movements with a range of demands, from limited autonomy to outright secession from India (Singh 2016; Singh and Pani 2012). These movements are closely related to the grievances over the fear of large-scale immigration, destruction of natural resources and more importantly, the issue of cultural distinctiveness and differences from the Indian nationhood. The Indian State responded by granting political autonomy through the creation of states – like Mizoram, Nagaland and Meghalaya – out of Assam and self-governing autonomous regions – like the autonomous district councils – within the existing states (see States Reorganisation Commission 1955; Singha and Singh 2016), deployment of security forces including military, police and intelligence and the ceasefires with armed groups. The conflicts have created a politically volatile situation and unstable economic conditions (Singha and Singh 2016; Nath 2004). The conflicts have also demoralised the Indian state and its institutions, and in turn, several new institutional practices have developed (Singh 2018).

The Northeast region is the only region of the country which has a dedicated federal ministry and a regional planning agency. In addition, Northeast India has gained prominence under the Look East policy and now the Act East policy, since the region is projected as the potential ‘gateway’ for trade and other activities with East and Southeast Asia. Several connectivity projects, cultural exchange programmes and cross-border trade have been launched under the overall framework of the Look East policy and now the Act East policy. The region has also been trying to showcase its potentials to Southeast and East Asian markets.

Successive central (federal) and local (provincial) governments have undertaken different development activities, which can be broadly categorised into (a) the central government-led initiatives such as connectivity and other infrastructure projects, facilitation of border trade, regular exchange of high-level visits, organising business summit and conducting academic and policy studies; (b) the local government-led initiatives, such as organising cultural festivals, trade and industrial fairs,

development of border areas, promoting tourism, etc.; and (c) the non-governmental voluntary initiatives, including extension of medical services, people-to-people contact through tourism, culture, sports etc. The activities are summarised below:

Table 1.2 Activities relevant to the Look/Act East policy in Northeast India

S.No	*Connectivity*	*Commerce*	*Culture, tourism and others*
1	Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project, Rih Tedim Road Project, India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, Trans Asian Highway	Cross-border trade including the opening of Border Haats	Sangai Festival (Manipur), Hornbill Festival (Nagaland), Pangsu-Pass Festival (Arunachal Pradesh) and other cultural exchange programmes for fostering people-to-people contact
2	Development of National Highways	Opening of Land Custom Stations (LCSs) at different places for clearance of goods imported or exported by land	Seminars and research studies by academic institutions, think tanks and research institutes
3	North East Road Network Connectivity Improvement Project (Phase 1& 2)	Construction of Integrated Check Posts (ICPs) at various places such as Moreh (Manipur)	Regular official high-level visits and business delegations, setting up of administrative department by the state governments, including Committee of Act East Policy Affairs
4	Expansion of rail and air connectivity	Development of border towns such as Moreh (Manipur)	Sports, including Manipur Polo International; medical services and scholarship program; North East Connectivity Summit
5	Agreement on land border crossing and road/land-based transportation with adjacent countries such as Dhaka-Agartala, Guwahati-Shillong-Dhaka, and Calcutta-Dhaka-Shillong	Act East Business Show, Assam International Trade, Industrial Fair, Act East Policy Forum	India-ASEAN car rally, educational exchange programme

Note: The list is indicative only.

At an election campaign meeting in Arunachal Pradesh in 2014, the leader of the Bharatiya Janata Party Narendra Modi, who was then the Chief Minister of the state of Gujarat, had maintained that ‘No power in this world can snatch away our territory . .. The world has changed. China will have to shed this expansionist mentality. Only the development mentality will do’.[3] The statement was in reference to the territorial dispute between China and India, as the former has claimed parts of Arunachal Pradesh as its territory. At another election campaign rally in Assam, Mr. Modi accused the successive governments of Indian National Congress of being responsible for the ‘underdevelopment of the region due to lack of economic vision, attention and infrastructure’.[4] The Indian National Congress has ruled the country since Independence except for a few years. At another rally in Manipur, Mr. Modi noted that the development of the Northeast region is vital for the progress of the country.[5] Likewise, the election manifesto of the Bharatiya Janata Party in 2014 promised to accord priority to infrastructure development (see Bharatiya Janata Party 2014).

A few months later, Mr. Modi became the Prime Minister of India after his party and supporting allies won the general elections by defeating the incumbent Indian National Congress-led government. His government has also accorded due emphasis to the accelerated development of the Northeast region, and subsequently turned the Look East policy into the Act East policy (Press Information Bureau 2014). The focus has been on reducing the isolation of the region by improving connectivity through road, rail, telecommunication and waterways sectors. The same party also came to power in several states including Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur and Tripura. Some state governments, Assam and Manipur in particular, have exhibited a keen interest in the policy by taking up several steps, including setting up the Committee for Operationalisation of Act East Policy by Manipur and the Act East Policy Affairs Department by Assam. The latter aims to ‘formulate, implement and monitor the state policies concerning the neighbouring and other foreign countries so as to reap the benefits of implementation of the Act East policy by the government of India’ (Government of Assam 2017). The states of the region are set to open more visa facilitation offices to issue visas on arrival facility for foreign nationals to boost tourism.

The region has also become an important destination for investments in infrastructure development by international financial institutions such as the

World Bank, the Asian Development Bank and the Japan International Cooperation Agency.[6] Japan is a key investment partner in Northeast India, and is being promoted within the overall structure of Japan's Expanded Partnership for Quality Infrastructure and India's Act East policy (see Chapter 7). Referring to the Northeast Road Connectivity Project (Phase II), the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) claimed that 'the assistance from JICA will improve the connectivity in the Northeast region of India through the improvement of roads and bridges, thereby promoting regional socio-economic development' (Japan International Cooperation Agency 2017). In 2017, India and Japan jointly set up the Act East Forum, which is expected to:

> provide a platform for India-Japan collaboration under the rubric of India's Act East Policy and Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy ... The Forum will identify specific projects for economic modernization of India's Northeast region including those pertaining to connectivity, developmental infrastructure, industrial linkages as well as people-to-people contacts through tourism, culture and sports-related activities.
>
> (Government of India 2017)

Table 1.3 Road length in relation to area and population (as of 31 March 2011)

States	*Total road length (in km)*	*Area (sq. km)*	*Road length (in km)*		*Total length of National Highways (in km)*	*National highways (in km)*	
			Per 100 sq. km in area	*Per one lakh of population*		*Per 100 sq.km of area*	*Per one lakh of population*
Arunachal Pradesh	21,655	83,743	25.75	1558.98	1,992	2.38	144.08
Assam	241,789	78,438	308.26	775.73	2,836	3.62	9.10
Manipur	19,133	22,327	85.70	702.98	959	4.30	35.23
Meghalaya	11,984	22,429	53.43	404.32	810	3.61	27.33
Mizoram	9,810	21,081	46.53	899.13	927	4.40	84.97
Nagaland	34,146	16,579	205.98	1724.02	494	2.98	24.94
Sikkim	4,630	7,096	65.25	761.92	62	0.87	10.20
Tripura	33,772	10,486	322.07	919.96	400	3.81	10.90
All India	4,690,342	3,287,240	142.68	387.57	70,934	2.61	5.86

Source: (Government of India 2015, 352)

Events like the Northeast Connectivity Summit are being organised regularly ‘in order to catalyze economic connectivity and facilitate infrastructure intervention from both the public and private sector’ (see North-East Regional Advisory Council 2018). The organiser claimed that ‘the private sector from India and abroad have also shown a lot of interest in investing in infrastructure in the Northeast’ (see North-East Regional Advisory Council 2018). The Summit which was held in Kohima (Nagaland) in 2017 was attended by officials and business delegates from several countries. The Summit deliberated upon building an economic corridor with Southeast Asia, people-to-people contacts, shared biodiversity and infrastructure requirements in terms of roads, railways, inland waterways, airports and market linkages.[7]

Enhancing connectivity with East and Southeast Asia would certainly be a ‘game changer’ for the development of this region.[8] The Act East policy aims at enhancing road, rail, air and telecommunications connectivity within Northeast India, and between Northeast India and Southeast Asia for smooth flows of people and goods. While some progress has been made on the intra-regional and subregional connectivity front, there is still a long way to go. Physical connectivity is crucial for enhancing economic engagement with East and Southeast Asia. However, most of the ongoing infrastructure projects are showing an abysmal rate of completion. There are allegations of money for developing infrastructure being siphoned off into private hands. The deplorable condition of crucial roads has remained the same for years. This author has the privilege of travelling on the decisive Imphal-Moreh road (Manipur), which constitutes a part of the Asian Highway, at least twice a year. In terms of facilitating bilateral trade and cross-border economic activities with the neighbouring countries, significant progress has been made with Bangladesh and Bhutan, though not so with China and Myanmar. After the Sino-Indian war of 1962, the borderland area of India and China became a highly militarised border.

Table 1.4 Tourism in Northeast India

State	2001		2005		2010		2012	
	Domestic	Foreign	Domestic	Foreign	Domestic	Foreign	Domestic	Foreign
Arunachal	6349	323	3005	289	227857	3395	317243	5135
Assam	1010651	6171	2467652	10782	4050924	15157	4511407	17543
Manipur	76527	183	94299	316	114062	389	134541	749
Meghalaya	178697	2390	375901	3099	652756	4177	680254	5313
Mizoram	28771	152	44715	273	57292	731	64249	744
Nagaland	9948*	920*	17470	883	21094	1132	35915	2489
Sikkim	203306	31028	251744	16523	700011	20757	558538	26489
Tripura	1512	1512	216330	2677	342273	5212	361786	7840

* Figures are estimated
Source: Government of India. *India Tourism Statistics* (different years), New Delhi: Ministry of Tourism, Government of India

The states of the region over the years could not attract potential investors from within and outside the country. There is a lack of information about the potential opportunities of Northeast India in East and Southeast Asia. Likewise, Southeast and East Asian countries have limited knowledge of and information about Northeast India. State governments of the region lack clear vision and unable to provide concrete plans for actualising the policy. They have not been able to reach out to East and Southeast Asia and other countries to showcase their strengths in order to attract more investments. As a result, in spite of sharing a common land border with several countries, the Northeast region has not been able to take full advantage of the policy. The role of the Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region is unclear and plays no significant role. It is also not clear of the difference between this ministry and the North Eastern Council. The journal *Eastern Quarterly*, in an editorial, had stated that ‘the idea of turning this region into a gateway for trade and commerce with Southeast Asia remains mere propaganda since hardly anything concrete has been achieved so far. There has been too much talk with too little work’(Eastern Quarterly 2015, 1).

It is necessary to identify the needs and priorities of each state of the region. It is also equally important to focus on the overall development of border areas, not just building road highways. More importantly, there is a critical concern about the ensuing conflict between the local and the national interests. Firstly, there is the fear that different projects undertaken under the policy would lead to large-scale immigration, exploitation of natural resources, human trafficking and militarisation. Many argued that

the policy does not take into account the ground realities and hence is marked by a 'lack of clarity'.[9] During my fieldwork in Manipur, which is considered as the 'gateway' to Southeast Asia, I noticed the trust deficit between the local communities and state agencies, and also between different state agencies. State authorities are widely accused of indulging in corrupt practices and highhandedness.[10] There is also a situation of mistrust between local and central government agencies.

The local people are not well informed about the Act East policy. The policy does not reflect a direct impact on their lives. For instance, the demand for the reopening of Stilwell Road is not been taken seriously by the central government due to security concerns, but the local people believe that its reopening does not pose any threat to the security of the country (Thomas 2017, 116–123). It is also important to resolve the border dispute between India and Myanmar in order to facilitate the construction of border fencing.[11] This is attainable if the two countries desire to do so.

On the potential side, tourism is an area which should be accorded precedence under the policy. Historical and cultural links between Northeast India and Southeast Asia is an advantage (see Chapter 2). This should be reinforced by educational and cultural exchange programmes for expanding people-to-people contact.[12] Pilgrimage tourism is an area which needs to be promoted, particularly in Sikkim (Kharsyntiew 2017, 24–43). States of the region have been regularly organising cultural events with the aim to showcase their cultural practices to the visitors from different countries, and more importantly for enhancing trade potential of the area (Bath 2017, 101). The Sangai Festival is held in Manipur annually as a trade, investment and tourism promotion event. The festival is named after Sangai, the brow-antlered deer found only in the state (Government of Manipur 2017). Similarly, the Hornbill Festival is being organised in Nagaland. The festival (held for ten days, December 1–10) is named after the hornbill, one of the most important bird species. Secondly, there is an urgent need to assess the export potential of each state to their immediate neighbours. Thirdly, the introduction of cross-border land transportation services shall also be given prior attention. Furthermore, adequate steps should be taken to concretise the informal cross-border trade, particularly at Moreh (India) and Namphalong (Myanmar), into an organised sector as the current barter trade

is outdated. Finally, there is an urgent need for investment in developing human resources, which at present is not a priority concern.

About the book

The present book hopes to bridge the knowledge deficit that exists in our understanding of the Northeast part of India vis-à-vis the Act East policy. Much has been discussed and written about this policy and its relevance in the context of Northeast India. However, the existing academic and activist writings seldom spell out the priorities of different states of the region and how they are being pursued by the present government in the country. Thus, the present volume makes an attempt to answer the following pertinent questions: what should be done to achieve the desired goal? What are the specific needs and priorities of different states? How can Northeast India showcase their potentials? What are the challenges? What is the significance of the change from Look to Act East policy? Is it merely changing nomenclature? Has the regime change affected the continuity in the policy? What are the short- and long-term goals of the policy? Various chapters in this volume shall try to answer these questions.

The opening essay in the volume by Shristi Pukhrem examines the strategic importance of the Northeast region in India's Southeast Asia policy and its implications in India-ASEAN relations. Pukhrem maintains that the centrality of the issues and interests of Northeast India is critical in the implementation of the idea of 'Act East'. Munmun Majumdar also argues that the intention to promote commerce, connectivity and culture have to be revisited in the context of converting the Northeast region into an economic hub. In doing so, the critical test for the success of the Act East policy lies to a great extent in India's ability to strengthen its ties with Myanmar, in addressing the existing gaps and preparing the region for staging the operationalising of the policy plan.

Rakhee Bhattacharya critically examines the Act East policy as an attempt to concretise economic cooperation with Eastern and Southeastern neighbours. Therefore, the state affair has become proactive in the Northeast region. Sonu Trivedi observes that given the strategic significance of the region, India aims to make it as a pivot for its

connectivity to the rest of the Asia-Pacific region by bridging the missing link via Myanmar. P.S. Ramya tries to understand Myanmar's perspective on the Act East policy. Ramya maintains that the political change in Myanmar has ushered new opportunities to develop between the two countries. The essay by Nandini Bhattacharyya Panda addresses the Act East policy as an essential design to make Northeast India a 'power house' of the Indian economy. Panda traces the history of border trade in Northeast India as an important index which may partly explain the complex economic ethnology of the region inhibiting the progress.

Taking a thematic departure from the earlier chapters, Jiten Yumnam examines the Act East policy as a change of vision and strategies from the Look East policy. Yumnam argues that the policy is a clear manifestation of the aggressive pursuance of neoliberal policies across Northeast India. Yumnam analyses how the intent, decision-making processes and implications of the policy led to much concerns among the local inhabitants. On the other hand, Barnali Roy and Arobindo Mahato strongly argue that given the peculiar geopolitical location of the region, the cross-border markets are likely to be effective for the region than the national markets. Thus, the region has to be a target economic zone for international trading. The essay by Sangay Lachenpa suggests that the reopening of Nathula Pass has heralded a new epoch in the Sino-Indian relations in general, with specific interest generated in the context of border trade in Sikkim. Unfortunately, even after a decade of its opening, the potential is yet to be realised, Sangay argues.

Kaustubh Deka describes how the Act East policy has a commitment and vision to make the Northeast region into a trading and commercial hub of Southeast Asia. This chapter focuses on the historic Ledo Road (Stilwell Road) in order to ascertain the prospects and potentials of the Upper Assam and its borderland areas. Nongthombam Jiten demonstrates that the process of imposing new nationalism onto old societies has cornered the border region of Northeast India and Northwest Myanmar into the peripheral area. Thus, the conceptualisation of the borderland from the insider's point of view is essential for a proper understanding of its people and the forces of change to which they are exposed. Finally, C.V. Lalmalsawmi explores the conspicuous paradox in the Act East implementation of connectivity projects that aim to link the Northeast region with the eastern neighbours due to the existence of Inner Line Permit in the region.

Notes

1 The population of Scheduled Tribes constitutes about 124 lakh out of the total population of 455 lakh of the Northeast region as per the Census of India, 2011.

2 India and Myanmar allow the movement of their citizens who live in areas adjoining 16 km from the international border.

3 'Modi talks tough on influx, Arunachal', *The Telegraph*, February 23, 2014.

4 Sandeep Phukan, 'In Assam, Narendra Modi describes how Congress "betrayed" it', *NDTV*, February 8, 2014.

5 'Modi in Imphal, says PM has done nothing for the Northeast', *India Today*, February 8, 2014.

6 Naresh Mitra, 'Rs 4000 crore aid from Japan for better road connectivity in North East', *Times of India*, April 7, 2017.

7 'Kohima forum stresses connecting Northeast India with Myanmar, Bangladesh', *Mizzima*, September 24, 2017.

8 This was stated by the Indian foreign minister, Sushma Swaraj, during her address at the Delhi Dialogue, which took place in New Delhi in 2017.

9 This was stated to the author by several scholars in Delhi, Guwahati and Imphal. Similar views have been raised by several people who are familiar with issues of Northeast India.

10 Khelen Thokchom, 'Review eases frisking process', *The Telegraph*, February 10, 2015.

11 The author visited Moreh in March 2015.

12 'Northeast can be fulcrum of India-ASEAN ties: Arunachal Dy CM', *Northeast Today*, August 8, 2017.

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Part I
The changing geopolitics

1 Act East policy

Northeast India as a bridgehead to ASEAN

Shristi Pukhrem The present chapter examines the strategic importance of India's Northeast region in the country's Southeast Asia policy, the Act East policy, and the implications of its development for India-ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations) relations. While advocating for the development of Northeast India through fostering closer engagement with Southeast Asia on the one hand, and integration with the rest of India on the other, it would be necessary to first lift the region out of the difficult socio-economic situation resulting from prolonged isolation, remoteness and other associated problems. Expanding capacity building and involvement of the local population would be crucial for making Northeast India capable of harnessing the India-ASEAN economic synergies. Accelerated development of the region is an essential requirement to get rid of the present situation where the gains of India-ASEAN integration have simply bypassed the region. Keeping in mind the centrality of the issues and interests of Northeast India is critical in the implementation of the Act East policy.

The issues

Southeast Asia obviously occupies pivotal importance in India's foreign policy, holding both strategic and economic interests. Myanmar also being a member of the ASEAN, India shares a land border with ASEAN, and a maritime border with Thailand and Malaysia. In this context, the Northeast region of India has become the crucial 'gateway' for India to reach out to the ASEAN (see Ministry of External Affairs 2018). India has also realised

the ASEAN is the ‘nucleus of a dynamic Southeast Asia’. However, India is equally concerned about China’s growing influence and maritime security in the region (Mattoo 2001). As India’s global trade takes place through the sea routes, India is hoping for ASEAN to play a decisive role in establishing a multilateral security order in the region. Although ASEAN and Japan see India as a potential balancing power vis-a-vis China, India preferred a complementary relationship to confrontation (Mattoo 2001).

The imperative of strategic cooperation between India and ASEAN apart, economic considerations also significantly factored in India’s increased interest in the region. India is keen to harness the potential of cooperation with ASEAN in trade and investment, science and technology, tourism, human resource development and infrastructure. For instance, export-oriented ASEAN countries have significant hardware and manufacturing capabilities. India could exploit the synergies between the hardware capabilities of ASEAN countries and its own software and services capabilities. Both India and ASEAN offer excellent potential for the development of tourism, thereby encouraging people-to-people connectivity across the Northeast region of India (Sailo 2012).

India’s Look East policy,[1] now termed the Act East policy with a greater focus on its implementation, seeks to establish closer political relations with ASEAN, evolve strategic links with its member countries and develop strong economic ties with the Asia-Pacific region. The policy also manifests India’s strategy to carve out a place in the Asia-Pacific region. Another interesting dimension of the policy is that of showcasing India’s economic potential for investments and trade. The initial focus on the ASEAN apart, India has opened itself to the eastern neighbours encompassing China, Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand. India has maintained relationships with them bilaterally as well as through different regional frameworks such as the East Asia Summit (EAS), Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC) and ASEAN.

Northeast India, which is rightly considered India’s ‘gateway’ to Southeast Asia, is lagging behind mainly due to poor infrastructure and connectivity. The standard development indicators, including road link, banking, access to health care and power consumption are still low. If literacy is high, there is the poor quality of education. The region has been

uniquely disadvantaged by the Partition of India into India and Pakistan in 1947 (NEC and MDONER 2008). However, the initiatives like India-Myanmar-Thailand Highway project from Moreh in India to Mae Sot in Thailand via Myanmar; India-ASEAN car rallies from Guwahati to Indonesia in 2004 and from Indonesia to Guwahati in 2012, and upgrading and building of the missing links between Jiribam (India) and Mandalay (Myanmar) towards establishing a rail link between Delhi and Hanoi via Myanmar, Thailand and Cambodia could promote trade and tourism between India and ASEAN.

As the post-Cold War period witnessed a turnaround in global politics, India's relations with ASEAN have significantly improved over the years. The improvement brought bilateral and multilateral cooperation at a new level. This was also the occasion when India underwent economic reforms and the Look East policy. Subsequently, ASEAN also started looking Westward in the wake of the economic crisis. Thus, a combination of the strategic shift in the foreign policy of India and a change in ASEAN's perception towards India has led to the fostering of India-ASEAN relations. India also wanted to showcase its economic potentials for investments and trade without exhibiting any hegemonic ambition (see Naidu 2004). It is also envisaged that India's economic relations with Southeast Asia would help in ushering economic development of Northeast India. Thus, the Look East policy should not necessarily be seen either as a strategy to counterbalance China or to occupy an influential position in Southeast Asia (Mishra 2014).

Strengthening political relations

India relied on a two-fold political and diplomatic strategy in order to build a dialogue partnership with ASEAN and establish bilateral relations with select ASEAN countries. Over time, India has expanded its engagement with ASEAN and others in the Asia-Pacific such as Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand. This reflects not merely an external economic policy, but also a shift in India's vision of the world towards reaching out to its neighbours in the region. India-ASEAN relations institutionalised with India becoming a sectoral dialogue partner in 1992, a full dialogue partner

in 1995 and member of the ASEAN Regional Forum in 1996. By 2002, the relationship had further strengthened after India became a summit-level partner of ASEAN. Since then, the India-ASEAN Summit has been held annually. It is the shared history of peaceful cultural and trade relations and people-to-people contact that have cemented India and ASEAN together. Delivering the Annual Singapore Lecture in Singapore on April 9, 2002, on 'India's Perspectives on ASEAN and the Asia-Pacific Region', the then Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee emphasised that India's close civilisational links with Southeast Asia go back over a millennium. Vajpayee pointed out:

Historically, we have been linked by culture and commerce. India, China and regional maritime centres like Singapore played leading roles in the flourishing trade of Asia – shaping the historical development of this region. The cross-fertilization of human experiences and the spiritual interaction between India and East Asia has left an indelible mark on the regional art, architecture, language and culture. It is a fundamental fact of geography that India is in the immediate neighbourhood of ASEAN.

(Ministry of External Affairs 2002)

Geographically, India is in the immediate neighbourhood of ASEAN, sharing land and maritime borders with Myanmar, Thailand and Indonesia. This provides the pragmatic logic of pursuing common goals in the region through sub-regional groupings, e.g. MGC that brings together Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Vietnam, Thailand and India; and BIMSTEC that brings together Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Nepal.

India has always looked towards Southeast Asia as a region whose history, culture and destiny are linked with that of India. The convergence of strategic, economic and political factors in the region has provided the ambient conditions for India and ASEAN to nurture their relations in the areas of security and development because they are not involved in any territorial disputes or other security-related conflicts. India's interest in economic and strategic alignment with Southeast Asia, on the one hand, and ASEAN looking westward as evident in their increasing response to Indian initiatives, on the other, have brightened the prospect of strengthening India-ASEAN relations in the new world order.

Strategic engagements

The India-ASEAN relations have expanded to include security and other areas of strategic importance. In pursuit of peace, stability and development in South Asia and Southeast Asia, India acceded to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC) during the Second ASEAN-India Summit held in Bali, Indonesia in 2003. On the same occasion, ASEAN and India also signed the Joint Declaration for Cooperation to Combat International Terrorism. Further, the ASEAN-India Partnership for Peace, Progress and Shared Prosperity was signed in 2004 during the Third ASEAN-India Summit held in Vientiane, Lao People's Democratic Republic. The Summit demonstrated the commitment to jointly address the common challenges to political and economic security, including food, human and energy security, cooperation to combat international terrorism and other transnational crimes, synergise the strengths of the two regions as powerful engines of growth, collaborate in areas of disarmament and non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, promote cooperation in science and technology and human resource development. All this has paved the way for India and ASEAN to expand the scope of their political and security dialogue and establish a mutually beneficial economic and commercial relationship. Since the region grapples with a bewildering array of security threats and international terrorism, it is important that India and ASEAN strengthen their cooperation, and this, in turn, will help reinforce any efforts to sustain development, peace and security in the region. Besides, India's involvement in MGC and BIMSTEC would be crucial in promoting regional cooperation.

India supported the notion of ASEAN centrality in evolving 'regional architecture for peace, stability, development and prosperity', a high watermark of India's ASEAN diplomacy. During the ASEAN-India Commemorative Summit held in 2012, the then Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh had noted that 'ASEAN has shown the way for the entire region, building a regional mechanism of cooperation and consensus that has become a great force for peace and prosperity' (Ministry of External Affairs 2012). The statement is indicative of India's commitment to strengthen strategic partnership with ASEAN. The commitment to establish

the India-ASEAN Free Trade Area (AIFTA) covering trade in goods has demonstrated India's commitment to fostering cooperation with ASEAN.

Economic cooperation

Realising their economic potential for closer economic ties, India and ASEAN concluded the Framework Agreement on Comprehensive Economic Cooperation in 2002 which envisages the establishment of a free trade area in goods, services and investment over the next decade or so (Gaur 2003). Article 3, titled 'Trade in Goods', which came into force in 2011, helps institutionalise the growing economic relationship between the two regions and paves the way for the creation of one of the world's largest free trade areas. The deepening of ties is reflected by the fact that India's trade with ASEAN has been rapidly growing (Mohan 2012, 5). The Vision Statement of the ASEAN-India Commemorative Summit held in New Delhi in 2012 stated the commitment of ASEAN and India to their 'efforts in advancing economic cooperation and engaging the emerging regional economic architecture, including organising multi-sectoral strategic economic dialogues' (Ministry of External Affairs 2012) towards achieving a target of USD $100 billion for ASEAN-India trade by 2015.

ASEAN and India have also been working on enhancing private sector engagement, aviation and tourism cooperation. In view of the geographical contiguity, cultural affinity and economic dynamism of the two regions, Amita Batra pointed to a high potential of trade between India and ASEAN in the areas of information technology, business process outsourcing, pharmaceuticals, space science and oceanography (Batra 2009a, 1–4). In the context of Northeast India, Batra suggested that greater links with Southeast Asia through the India-ASEAN FTA would help the region. At the same time, Batra argued that in order for the advantages of the potential connectivity offered by the Indian-ASEAN FTA to contribute positively to the growth of Northeast India, it should first be lifted out of its current low economic equilibrium. In other words, 'prior development' of the region is a precondition to its ability to exploit the benefits of connectivity with the ASEAN (Batra 2009b, 1–4).

For India, the major gains of the ASEAN-India Free Trade Area are observed to be in terms of enhancement in India's global image. In essence, the shift in India's foreign policy vis-à-vis Southeast Asia, as manifests in the Act East policy, has been the significant factor in strengthening its relations with ASEAN in general and also with each constituent countries of ASEAN in particular. On the other hand, ASEAN's growing interest in India's Southeast Asia initiative is clearly evident in their commitment to cross-border infrastructure development for regional connectivity and relationships that encompass trade, investment, production and security. However, India and ASEAN have a long way of expanding trade and cooperation in other areas. Besides trade and enhancing physical connectivity, standardised policies and regulations, which would facilitate institutional connectivity and smooth cross-border movement of goods, services and people would be crucial to India-ASEAN economic integration.

Northeast India and Act East policy: challenges and prospects

India's Northeast region is surrounded by powerful economies, i.e. China and Southeast Asia. The region stands between the rest of India and Southeast Asia via Myanmar. Being a geopolitically important and resource-rich place, the region has tremendous potential to become a commercial hub and international tourist destination (Batra 2009b). The region has vast opportunities for investment and cooperation in sectors like hydropower and oil and natural gas. Therefore, development initiatives for the region and Myanmar are critical for enhancing India-ASEAN connectivity (Kimura and Umezaki 2011). In the given perspective, strategies to connect India with Southeast Asia need to focus on enhancing rail and road links through the Northeast region.

However, the Northeast region continues to be remote due to inadequate (connectivity) infrastructure and lack of economic development. Before India's Independence, the region was among the most prosperous regions of the country, whereas today the region is lagging behind in most of the

important parameters of growth (NEC and MDONER 2008, 6). India's policymakers have identified the poor state of infrastructure – roads, railways, waterways and power in particular – as the biggest constraint in the development of the eight states of the region – Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland, Meghalaya, Sikkim and Tripura (NEC and MDONER 2008). Multiple factors like poor road, rail and air connectivity, non-functional inland waterways and blocked sea routes has isolated the region from the rest of India and the world. Former Indian Foreign Secretary, Sujatha Singh, while speaking at a conference on infrastructure and connectivity in Guwahati in 2014 dwelt upon the challenges of developing the region. She noted:

> Our Northeast is the gateway to ASEAN and countries of Southeast Asia, but before we can talk of taking advantage of the economic opportunities that are there to be so exploited, we must focus on our Northeastern region itself and strengthening its economic base and infrastructure.
>
> (Ministry of External Affairs 2014)

The East-West Corridor project was launched to connect the region to the mainland of the country through a 3,300-kilometer-long four-lane highway between Porbandar (Gujarat) and Silchar (Assam). However, this megaproject, which was projected to be completed around 2009, has virtually remained at a standstill. In addition, under the Non-Lapsable Central Pool of Resources (NLCPR) scheme,[2] the central government has introduced about 151 infrastructure projects during 2011. However, most of these projects have failed, mainly due to the region's geographical conditions (Saikia 2012).

On the eastern front, the highway that connects the Northeast region to Myanmar runs through hilly terrain afflicted by various insurgencies, and the highway connecting Assam, Nagaland and Manipur is regularly affected by public protests and violence. The Stilwell Road, which connects Ledo (Assam) to China via Myanmar, is critical in unlocking the region and harnessing its economic potential as a node of the regional transport network. However, the opening has been inordinately delayed for security reasons. Notwithstanding its economic potentials, the region has never been an attractive destination for external investors due to the unstable security environment, and also partly because of India's uneasy relationship with the countries sharing borders with the region. Poor infrastructure and governance have resulted in low productivity and market access (NEC and

MDONER 2008). Given the challenges of developing the strategic Northeast region, India's strategy should be to ensure that the region is fully geared to reap the benefits of the cross-border/regional connectivity initiatives.

The region, which shares 98 percent of its border with other countries, had to endure almost half a century of closed borders with its neighbours. Alienation from the national mainstream and the quests for ethnic identity have led to different armed movements for a long time. The situation has adversely affected development and posed problems for the Act East policy. Insurgent groups set up hideouts in neighbouring countries, especially Myanmar. It is, therefore, critical in addressing the challenges of border management, especially with regard to cross-border illegal immigration, terrorism, drugs and arms supply and other forms of non-conventional security threats.

Prospects

Having rich natural resources, primarily the large hydro-energy potential apart from coal and gas-based power, the Northeast region has the potential to transform itself into a commercial hub and tourist destination. There is a huge, untapped, emerging market, which should prove to be of interest to domestic and international investors (Sailo 2012). A well-integrated transport system at the regional level is essential to accelerate the economic integration process. Geographically contiguous regions find it much easier to strengthen their surface transport connectivity, provided the concept is politically compatible. Besides, the world economy is highly interdependent, thereby making transport cost a significant determinant of competitiveness. Thus, an integrated and efficient surface transport network, e.g. the Asian Highway, is an essential element of economic integration at different levels – sub-regional, regional and global.[3]

Moreover, it is important to put in place an adequate facilitation system so that the smooth movement of people and goods across international borders and countries can be ensured. Therefore, the regional cooperation initiatives need to address the issues of strengthening transport linkages as well as facilitation services to achieve the desired economic integration. In

essence, the idea of creating ‘an integrated economic space’ that stretches from India’s Northeast to Southeast Asia is reinforced by the argument that for the ‘landlocked’ region, the Asian Highway is crucial to the revival of the cross-continent transport network that the legendary Silk Route provided in the past (Ministry of External Affairs 2005).

India’s initiative to liberalise its civil aviation policy has helped improve air connectivity between India and ASEAN. The India-ASEAN Car rallies were successfully organised twice from Guwahati in Assam to Batam in Indonesia in 2004 and from Yogyakarta, Indonesia to Guwahati in 2012 passing through Northeast India, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia, Malaysia and Singapore. Such initiatives sensitised the people of ASEAN countries and India to the potential for trade, tourism and people-to-people contact. To enhance rail connectivity in the region, India has launched a feasibility study for upgrading and building the missing links between Jiribam in Manipur and Mandalay in Myanmar. India is assisting in upgrading the Mandalay-Yangon railway sector to establish a rail link between Delhi and Hanoi via Myanmar, Thailand and Cambodia. These road and rail links could, over time, connect with many North-South arterial roads being developed between Southeast Asia and China, thereby providing not only a cheap means of transporting goods, tourists and pilgrims between India and Southeast Asia, but also overland connectivity between China and India via Southeast Asia.

Though geographically contiguous, the connectivity between Myanmar and Northeast India is still very poor, and the trade facilitation is lacking. The physical infrastructure projects like the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, which is also a part of the Asian Highway, can fill the gap in connectivity and facilitate border trade. The highway can also be connected to India’s national highway network, including the Golden Quadrilateral, via this region. On the other hand, four states in the region, namely Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Tripura, share international land borders with Bangladesh. India has established several Land Custom Stations along the India-Bangladesh border, though inadequate infrastructure and transport and trade facilitation border have impacted border trade.

The Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project is likely to be an alternative route that can connect Northeast India and the rest of India via Myanmar, and an inland waterway along the Ganga is expected to enhance

the connectivity between mainland India and Northeast India via Bangladesh (De 2011). Bangladesh transit routes would, inter alia, facilitate India's access to Chittagong port and other ports in Myanmar, and also access to Myanmar's natural gas. Strengthening India's bilateral relations with the two strategic neighbours would be crucial to capitalising on the geographical advantage. India has been facing challenges on this front due to a strained relationship with Bangladesh. India has also been facing a similar situation with Myanmar, as their relationship is still tenuous. The issue relating to cross-border connectivity between India and Myanmar, and India and Bangladesh, need to be addressed with a strong sense of (political) commitment to strengthening bilateral relations and also keeping in view the broader agenda of India-ASEAN integration as envisaged in the Act East policy.

The proximity of Northeast India to the dynamic Southeast and East Asian economies, which is an advantage rather than a constraint, and the region's rich natural resources offer the right ambience for India's economic, security and cultural cooperation with ASEAN, Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal. The region has the potential to 'emerge as a strategic base' (Chakravarty 2017) for investors to access the booming markets in South Asia, BIMSTEC and ASEAN regions. Most policy-makers have now discarded the old notion of the region's geographical disadvantage. The new perspective is to transform this low economic activity area into a dynamic region.

In this perspective, priority needs have to be accorded to building adequate infrastructure in the border areas and providing connectivity and communication links to the potential cross-border trade points. Investment in railway infrastructure for both expansion and upgradation needs to be accorded priority. Providing railway in high-deficit areas like Sikkim, Mizoram and Manipur would facilitate a two-way process of integrating the region with not only the rest of India, but also the neighbouring countries. Four capital cities (Gangtok, Shillong, Imphal and Kohima) and several major towns of the region are still not connected by rail. Expansion of civil aviation networks within the region and with Southeast Asia, Nepal, Bangladesh and China would enhance movement of people and goods and stimulate tourism and trade, besides attracting investment in the region. An intermodal Asian Highway, as it grows transnational or global, is also

critical to overcoming the challenges of connectivity confronting this region, or India-ASEAN integration via this region for that matter.

The way forward

The Act East policy manifests India's ambition to be a major player in Southeast Asia. In this perspective, India's Northeast, where India ends and Southeast Asia begins, is considered to be the focal point of India's foreign policy vis-a-vis the Asia-Pacific countries. Therefore, it would be necessary to put in place a robust regional infrastructure development plan for Northeast India in order to neutralise the negative impact of constraints endemic in the region. One such proposal is to build a 'Northeast Corridor' that will link all the border (trade) points with Bhutan, Bangladesh and Myanmar. This will benefit the states of the region in terms of working together towards a common goal and development of local enterprises showcasing their economic potential (Mathur 2011). The East-West Corridor can be extended to different growth centres, border trade points, airports and seaports across the region.

The core issue is to get the capital cities of the eight states of the region connected by high-quality roads, rail and air networks. This idea of greater connectivity will help generate economic activities and open up underdeveloped border points with neighbouring countries. With the increased recognition of the geostrategic importance of the region vis-a-vis Southeast Asia, a well-connected Northeast India can thrive on the country's external trade relationships, especially with ASEAN. This region represents a major source of hydroelectric power, hydrocarbons (oil and gas), coal, limestone, tea, bamboo, etc. It is, therefore, important that the development of the region is considered as a vital element of 'Act East' diplomacy. What is required is an all-encompassing strategy for sustaining high economic growth and integration with the rest of the country, which will be crucial to strengthening India's relations with Southeast Asia. However, huge grants from the central government have not able to bring the desired development in the region. It is perhaps time to design and implement alternative approaches that ensure the involvement of the local population in the development process.

Institutional connectivity and people-to-people engagements are of vital importance to cultural and social integration as well as progress. It would, therefore, be necessary to capitalise on human resources development and culture, where India has a comparative advantage over many countries. Institutions like the Nalanda International University can showcase the ancient cultural links between India and Southeast Asia. The Indian Institute of Management (IIMs) and Indian Institute of Technology (IITs) can attract foreign students. India should, therefore, embark on a more proactive policy to harness its soft power towards ASEAN. Tourism is an area where much more can be done to reverse the trend of more Indians going to Southeast Asia. Investment in the promotion of tourism stimulates people-to-people contact and understanding of each other's culture and civilisation. As air travel has become the most efficient and, therefore, most popular mode of travel, initiatives to liberalise the civil aviation sector, e.g. 'Open Sky' policy, would brighten the prospect of India-ASEAN integration.

Unfortunately, the development of Northeast India has been a hostage to the state-centric security perception for a long time. The response to the armed conflict has tended to be centred round the exercise of the deployment of armed forces, the political dialogue and the allocation of large funds. These factors overlap or are highly correlated. In the world wide debate on peace and development, the notion of development as a precondition for peace should now be given precedence over the conservative idea of peace as a precondition for development. Economic and employment opportunities as by-products of infrastructure development in Northeast India will dissuade youth from indulging in unlawful activities. The foresight of connecting with the vibrant economies of Southeast Asia and East Asia will prove true, counting Northeast India as one among the globalised communities looking towards a peaceful and prosperous future.

External factors like the expansion of ASEAN, the increasing influence of China in Southeast Asia and the changing relationship with Myanmar also triggered the Act East policy as well as the shift in India's Northeast strategy. India had particularly been concerned about China's fast-expanding influence on Myanmar's military leadership in the post-General Ne Win era and reports of Chinese surveillance posts in Myanmar's territorial waters (Indian Ocean) to monitor developments of India's missile programme. Some analysts also suggested that strategic competition with China was the 'undeclared element' of the Act East policy, based on the

alarming trade value between China and Southeast Asia (Batabyal 2011). India's evolving economic and strategic relationship with Southeast Asia is yet another important external factor in the context of bringing the region as an integral part of the policy. Thus, there is a strong case for aligning the objective of the policy with a focus on a Northeast perspective – developing land connectivity between India and Southeast Asia through Northeast India in the present context. For real development to take place in the region (through trade and economic activities), it would be necessary to look at the prospect of Northeast India as a bridge, as well as part of a larger composite Southeast Asia including Southeast China (Sichuan), Bhutan, Bangladesh and Myanmar, with which the region is known to have traditional trade and cultural links (Ray 2005). The foreign policy mandarins could harp on a bold vision for the region's future – psychological and emotional integration with the rest of India and economic integration with Southeast Asia, which can be induced by improved connectivity.

Conclusion

The Act East policy can be credited with facilitating India becoming an important stakeholder in the Indo-Pacific's strategic discourse. Connectivity with Myanmar, and then with other ASEAN countries, is the key to strategic priority for India. In this context, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has emphasised the importance of the Northeast region in the Act East policy, saying that 'We have created the Act East policy and the Northeast is at the heart of it'.[4]

Notes

1 For more information, please see 'India turned "Look East" policy into "Act East" policy: Modi in Myanmar', *First Post*, November 13, 2014.

2 Under the scheme, implemented since 1998, the unspent funds out of the 10 percent funds earmarked for the region by different ministries in India can be retained on an accrual basis.

3 For more information, see *Asian Highway*, retrieved from www.unescap.org/our-work/transport/asian-highway/about (Accessed on July 25, 2018).

4 ‘Global Investors’ Summit: Northeast at heart of Act East, says PM Modi’, *The Indian Express*, February 4, 2018.

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2 Northeast India's critical role in harnessing the three Cs

Commerce, connectivity and culture in the Act East policy *Munmun Majumdar* A very important dimension of the Look East policy was an attempt to link India’s landlocked Northeast region with the ASEAN. Prime Minister Narendra Modi unveiled the Act East policy at the 12th ASEAN-India Summit held in Nay Pyi Taw. The policy continues to be driven by economic and security interests and is extended beyond Southeast Asia, underlining the geopolitical importance of the region. This paper argues that the intention to promote the three Cs – commerce, connectivity and culture – have to be revisited in the context of converting the Northeast region of India into a soft power resource bank and economic hub. In doing so, the critical test for the success of the Act East policy lies to a great extent in India’s ability to strengthen its ties with Myanmar, in addressing the existing gap and preparing India’s Northeast for staging the operationalising of the policy plan.

Introduction

Landlocked Northeast India shares borders with Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, Myanmar and Nepal, while it is connected with mainland India only by the narrow 22-kilometre-wide Siliguri corridor in West Bengal state, called the 'Chicken's Neck', that controls access to the region. After Independence in 1947, the region lost access to the Chittagong Port in Bangladesh (then East Pakistan) and became not only landlocked, but also disconnected from their traditional markets. Access became difficult due to poor connectivity with the rest of India, and even this access to the region is possible in some areas only through the 'special permit', even for Indian citizens, not just for foreigners. The Restricted Areas Permit (RAP) for foreigners is a regulation imposed by the central government to prevent foreigners entering the region, while the British authority promulgated the East Bengal Frontier Regulation in 1873 in some areas to prevent the influx of 'outsiders' to those areas.

Northeast India was positioned in the Look East policy as a gateway to greater resources with the ASEAN countries, so that the region as a whole could benefit by opening commercial linkages with the ASEAN countries. The overall *raison d'etre* was to replace India's security-centric approach with the smart border principle that would cover safe and secure flow of people, goods, cross-border cooperation and improvement of transit infrastructure for increased trade efficiency. This new vision of the Northeast region as a springboard for launching intense economic integration with ASEAN countries necessitated the establishment of better links with Myanmar, since it is the only ASEAN member country that has both land as well maritime borders with India. The Indian states of Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram share long land borders with Myanmar's Kachin state, Sagaing division and Chin state. Befriending Myanmar, therefore, meant enabling geography to be used as an opportunity to translate into long-standing trade relations across land borders and the sea route, assisting the Northeast region to come out of its present state of remoteness and underdevelopment and reaping the benefits from the consequential transformation of the region into a land-linked one. Engaging Myanmar was also important because India cannot disregard the strategic importance of Myanmar for its security, particularly in the context

of the Northeast. Besides, Myanmar is of considerable significance as an attractive market and economic partner for the development of Northeast India, as well as a strategic buffer in the context of the China factor (Bhatia 2016).

Straddled between India and China, Myanmar is increasingly being wooed by both countries, since it is considered an important element in the strategic planning of India as well as China (Steinberg 2010). The distinct difference is that while there is popular distrust for China in Myanmar, it is largely absent vis-a-vis India. Ironically, India is helped by Myanmar's discomfort with China. As for Myanmar, its strategic importance allows it to diversify its economic portfolio and reduce its reliance on China, and at the same time extract as much from both India and China.

Under the rapidly changing geopolitical realities, defined by the assertive rise of China, India's policies towards ASEAN countries has evolved into a tool for greater economic engagement, as well as forging a strategic partnership and security cooperation not only with ASEAN countries, but also with the countries of Far East. However, to view India's engagement with its eastern neighbours as being to counter China only would be to miss the point. After all, India's policies in Myanmar alone have much more content than having to merely counter China. India provides development assistance to Myanmar in the areas it wants without being prescriptive.

Establishing economic, strategic, cultural and connectivity ties with Myanmar are central to the ends spelt out by the Act East policy– more so since expanding India's outreach from the Northeast region to the ASEAN region and beyond will not come to fruition unless Myanmar is taken into the loop. It is not surprising that several agreements, including one on maritime security cooperation, were signed during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Myanmar in 2017. Besides, India's policy of increased interaction with ASEAN countries and beyond complements Myanmar's policy of hedging. Again, the defence cooperation with India, specifically in terms of training of officers at Indian defence academies, training for UN peacekeeping duties from the Indian armed forces in 2017, joint patrolling along the border to tackle insurgency and also dispatching warships to Myanmar's ports at regular intervals have been crucial. Coupled with the sale of military equipment to Myanmar, which is actively seeking to diversify its defence imports, defence cooperation has continued to show

positive signs, with Tatmadaw's Commander-in-Chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing visiting India in 2017.

In the same manner, Myanmar also has much to gain from India's help in maritime security capacity building, including the sale of naval technologies such as sonars and lightweight torpedoes and joint training. The institutionalisation of cooperation against illicit drug trafficking across the border region through border patrolling has also been equally important. In terms of education, training and skill development, India is of great assistance. Close collaboration between the Indian Institute of Information Technology in Bengaluru and the Myanmar Institute of Technology, TATA Consultancy Service and India providing loans to develop and upgrade infrastructure projects such as Yangon-Mandalay rail link are examples of such cooperation.

At the 12th ASEAN-India Summit, held in Nay Pyi Taw in 2014, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi had said that 'a new era of economic development, industrialisation and trade has begun in India. Externally, India's Look East policy has become Act East policy'.[1] In this way, he made known to the world that India is not merely looking East, but is acting East as well.[2] That Modi chose Nay Pyi Taw to announce the Act East policy underscores and confirms the pivotal role that Myanmar has to offer both in terms of opportunity and challenges in the success of the policy. He has precisely spelt out that India's eastern journey begins on the western boundary of Myanmar, and Myanmar is therefore an important component in India's Act East policy. Consequently, extending bilateral relations between India and Myanmar beyond the strategic and security imperatives becomes important.

Recognising that the Act-East policy's success will be largely measured by its contribution to the security and economic development of the Northeast region, the states in the region have been drawn in as active partners in the policy. Taking this idea forward, the Indian government has been trying to engage the state governments, as well as academia and civil society institutions of the region, to look closely towards expanding contacts by accelerating the opening up of the Northeast region to Southeast Asia and beyond.

Since one of the fundamental elements of the policy is to promote security, stability, connectivity and prosperity of the Northeastern states, they are then significant yardsticks by which the success (or lack thereof) of

the policy can be measured. This makes it necessary to take a closer look at this Indian frontier and examine the potential that Northeast India advances in reaping the benefits from greater dedication to the three Cs, i.e. commerce, connectivity and culture.

Commerce

With a view to implementing the Act East policy, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi coined the term the natural economic zone and called for the Northeast region to be developed through the economic corridor to Southeast Asia. The concept of the development corridor, and the transformation of physical links into a development corridor, are attracting attention because of their projected economic benefits. While this is a promising offer, what must be understood is that even without adequate connectivity and an economic corridor, the geographical proximity between Northeast India and Myanmar has allowed long-standing trade relations across land borders and the borderland communities have been engaged in trade for ages (Ray 2005). As a matter of fact, the officially sanctioned border trade is limited because of the outdated regulations on the number and quantities of goods that can be sold. Historically, the people of the border have been dependent on each other for barter trade. The people from the Myanmar side of the border usually buy salt, clothes, medicines and other consumable items, while fish, agriculture produce and a certain amount of herbs are brought by the communities living on the Indian side of the border (Reserve Bank of India 2000). An important reason that cannot be discounted is that the communities living in border areas have no choice but to be interdependent on each other for daily needs. This is a strength as well an opportunity to seal the bond between the borderland people. Therefore, it is crucial to undertake an in-depth examination of whether the Act East policy that had been essentially crafted within the framework of neoliberalism has any room for the unique local ways of doing trade. Furthermore, it is important to consider whether the borderland communities where kinship ties are very strong are equipped to handle trade in the context of this policy, and how these communities will respond to transformations introduced with the opening of borders to formal trade.

It is essential to understand that while the ongoing infrastructural expansions are aimed at generating employment, what has to be kept in mind that they would also facilitate immigration into the region. This has implications for the region, particularly against the background that the region has in the past witnessed crises juxtaposing the migrants against the 'sons of the soil' (Sengupta 2016). There are genuine fears amongst the local people of the outcome of opening up to the ASEAN countries with the logic of market economics without accruing tangible benefits to the people.[3] Reservations have been expressed through agitations: for example, against the expansion of the railway from Assam to Meghalaya, the demand for the Inner Line Permit, etc.[4] Then again, apart from the serious implications on the use and extraction of resources, changes in the composition of the labour market and mobility, another impediment is the non-reconciliation of issues involving identities and citizenships. Hence, the spin-off impact on the Northeastern states of such a policy cannot be ignored. Under the circumstances, suitable measures need to be taken to safeguard the indigenous ways and practices and give adequate room to the local people to participate in the implementation of the policy. Unless the communities in the region reconcile the terms of the policies, the agendas may face an impasse.

The region has been battling insurgency movements with demands including independence, autonomy, tribal rights etc. Since the beginning of these movements, ethnic ties and tribal linkages between the people on either side of the India-Myanmar border have facilitated their movements and in extending assistance in seeking refuge. Likewise, Myanmar has been facing similar problems. Compounding the problem in Myanmar is that different religious affiliation sometimes overlaps into ethnic-nationalist narratives, and becomes entangled with ethnic and political grievances.

Myanmar's authorities have reaffirmed their respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of India and upheld the policy of not allowing any insurgent group to utilise their soil to undertake hostile acts against India. Myanmar also appreciated India for upholding the same principle.[5] These are reassuring statements, which very often, however, are not always in consonance with the ground reality.

While India conveyed to Myanmar for extending full support to the peace process initiative under the 21st Century Panglong Conference (India-

Myanmar Joint Statement),[6] China has established itself as a game changer in the Myanmar peace process when it mediated, insisted upon and logistically supported the Northern Alliance to participate in the peace process. What is even more revealing is the public statement issued by the Northern Alliance giving its support to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), suggesting that China would use its leverage on the peace process to secure its economic interests. In contrast, India rests its hope on positive assurances alone.

In 2015, India nearly had a diplomatic row with Myanmar, after its army was alleged to have crossed the international border in a bid to exterminate the insurgent hideouts.[7] The army's killing or injuring insurgents near the India-Myanmar border is a regular feature.[8] In the recent past, the two countries have also been engaged in contestation over border fencing repair (Das 2010), repairs of border pillars and other aspects of border management. With no clear-cut demarcation of the boundary, disputes over alleged encroachment of land have surfaced between villagers on both sides.[9] These incidents highlight the importance of border management. Here border management, apart from security concerns, includes the regulation of economic activity etc. It would be advisable, therefore, to upgrade security cooperation through information sharing, joint patrolling and cooperation. Amid challenges faced by both countries, including the Rohingya crisis and cross-border regulation, one notable move taken in 2018 was the approval of an agreement between India and Myanmar on the land border crossing. However, what is pertinent to note is that vigorous pursuit of the continental version of the Act East policy can be undertaken only when massive investments in physical infrastructure, improved markets and the creation of new supply chains in the region, together with India's ability to strengthen its ties with Myanmar, are in place.

Ethnic strife and insurgency have kept the region starved of business. Events such as the Asian car rally from Guwahati to Bangkok and a number of other similar events have failed to draw foreign investors because of the absence of a culture conducive for trade and commerce to flow smoothly. The proposed continental infrastructure developmental corridors pass through insurgent-prone areas. What India will have to consider seriously is that while supporting the democratic transition in Myanmar, it has to carefully follow Myanmar's policies towards its ethnic minorities. The

policy cannot be instituted on consideration of geography alone. While there are opportunities for cross-border connectivity and commerce, managing the challenges it poses, together with an active engagement with Myanmar, is necessary for the policy to become productive. If security is an important element of border management, so is the economic development of their shared frontiers.

Although the volume of trade with ASEAN countries has increased, most of the transactions are taking place through Chennai, Mumbai and other ports, and very few are coming through Myanmar into Northeast India. The weakest link in the 3-C formula is perhaps *commerce*. Even though there is no precise estimate of the volume of trans-border informal trade between Northeast India and Myanmar, it is widely believed that the official trade is only a fraction of the informal trade (Bezbarua 2007). Consequently, for the transnational movement of goods, capital and labour, cross-border exchanges through informal means will have to be evidenced so that no one can take advantage of the grey areas in unregulated transactions. Correspondingly, cooperation with Myanmar needs to be directed particularly to its Western and Northwestern regions, keeping in view the end results for the adjoining Northeastern states. Trade and investment policies require a more realistic assessment of goods to be traded, currency to be used, etc. vis-à-vis Myanmar, just as attending to cross-border transit deficit and poor connectivity is necessary for trade and commerce to flow smoothly. Unlike India, China has a better border facility with Myanmar, which helps China to penetrate deeper into Myanmar.

Abiding by first the Look East agenda, followed by the Act East agenda, India’s Northeast has become a frontier for engaging with the ASEAN countries that aimed at mitigating the multiple fault lines of the region. A careful examination, however, divulges a different story. In all the official speeches, the Act East has a special reference for India’s Northeast. But at the level of activity, there is very little that has actually benefitted the region, and most of the policies remain at the declaratory level. Neither have the agreements signed with Myanmar and other countries brought any conspicuous benefit to the region so far. The psychological disconnect between the policymakers in New Delhi and Northeast India is evident, for example, in the absence of any mention of Asia’s cleanest village of Mawlynnong in Meghalaya from the hyped Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, or

about the vast stretches of Sacred groves, an indigenous way of preserving the environment, from any environment-related projects.

As for the Northeastern states, they are yet to come up with a roadmap for executing the policy. The state governments have repeatedly blamed the central government for their sufferings. With the exception of Mizoram, all the states led by the Bharatiya Janata Party accusing the central government of its lack of support may not be a feasible excuse any longer. Instead, for an optimal outcome in commerce, attention will have to be directed at filling the inherent gaps in the existing policy. To scale up commerce and investment, issues that deter business, ranging from insurgency and non-existent infrastructure to non-conducive investment opportunities, will have to be tackled. Attending to security and resolving the problems are decisive factors while assessing the end results of the opening up of the Northeast region to Myanmar, whether it is for commerce, connectivity or culture.

Connectivity

The broad recognition that physical connectivity to the East opens up greater opportunities for the economic future of the Northeastern states has resulted in according a higher priority to key infrastructure projects with Myanmar as well as Thailand.[10] Driven by economic benefits, and to some extent by anxiety over China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) making deep inroads into Southeast Asia, India is seen as more proactive on connectivity. India has promised to help Myanmar in repairing the Kalewa-Yarggyi road segment and constructing or upgrading several bridges on the Tamu-Kyigone-Kalewa section of the trilateral highway. Myanmar would stand to benefit from Indian investment in infrastructure, but since India's financial support for the construction of infrastructures in Myanmar is located in remote and underpopulated areas, its impacts on mainstream Myanmar's communities may not be pronounced.

Ever since the bilateral air service agreement was signed in 2012, there have been reports on operating regular chartered flight services between Mandalay and Imphal and direct flights between New Delhi and Yangon, but new flight services are yet to start. Presently there is only one weekly direct flight between Calcutta and Yangon. Similarly, there are no direct

shipping links. Although road connectivity exists, cross-border passenger and goods transport services are yet to be operational. The agreement to launch bus service between Mandalay and Imphal has not taken off either. Likewise, emphasis on opening new and activating dormant trade routes, developing infrastructure, as well as facilitating border trade and transit points, Border Haats etc. will have to be seen working more efficiently. Moreover, how India seeks to execute and involve the Northeastern states in taking advantage of the continental version of the policy is yet to be seen. Therefore, although it is clear that without adequate cross-border connectivity, it would be highly difficult for Northeastern states to reap the full potential of the policy, much remains to be done in the existing connectivity projects.

Very often, fears of growing Chinese influence and cross-border terrorism have been cited as reasons for determining the extent of opening up the Northeast. The security considerations at certain conflict-prone points in bordering areas may be a factor in determining the extent of physical connectivity. These considerations make it necessary to evolve a complex development-security nexus, and to develop institutionalised cooperation in relation to issues such as drug trafficking and insurgency, as well as issues related to the environment, displacement and rehabilitation. The challenge undoubtedly lies in executing the policy in such a way that India is able to safeguard and promote its national interest, at the same time assisting the twin causes of security and development in the region.

Unlike India, China has been successful in pushing quickly forward for preferential access to the deep-sea port of Kyaukpyu on the Bay of Bengal, not far from the Indian-built Sittwe port in Rakhine, to connect the Bay of Bengal with Kunming province. Although India has objected to the linking of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Forum for Regional Cooperation (BCIM) within the wider framework of the Maritime Silk Road,[11] China’s projects have been included in its BRI. India is worried that by doing so, China will gain leverage over its developing investment partner. It is also concerned that Myanmar could become overly dependent on China’s loan and get trapped in debt burden through projects such as Kyaukpyu, which would in turn also slow down the process of democratisation. Although Myanmar is suspicious of Chinese influence, their concern for Chinese assistance remains supreme. And when the government argued that economic

development is the best solution to the long-running ethnic tensions in Rakhine state and has made boosting the country's economic development among its top priorities, it is obvious that Myanmar does not want to be left behind in climbing China's bus. India is therefore concerned whether it is a matter of time when Myanmar will fall in line with China.

Whether in the long run India would be able to draw advantage out of the counter- actions stemming from the debt burden remains to be seen; as of now, India has more than one reason to be concerned, since these projects will not only provide strategic openings for China, but also to pull Myanmar into its sphere of influence. In addition to the implications for India's Northeast, as clandestine arms shipments as well as contraband pass through the waters of the Kaladan river for the insurgent groups in the region (Goswami 2014), there is growing alarm over China's moves to achieve strategic presence in the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea, which could offset the obvious military advantage India has with its strategic Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

Coming at a time of intensified power rivalries, especially after the Quad – comprising Australia, India, Japan and the United States – has been revived, the Indo-Japan initiative, Asia Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC) presented as a distinctive initiative borne out of a consultative process which will be profitable and bankable, is increasingly seen as a counter to the BRI.[12] While India boycotted the inaugural Belt and Road Forum due to sovereignty concerns given that CPEC transits Indian territory in Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (PoK), the AAGC is increasingly seen as seeking synergy between the Act East policy and Japan's Expanded Partnership for Quality Infrastructure is noteworthy in the context of Japan emerging as a natural partner for the development of the Northeast.[13]

Japan has emphasised the important ancient links between Japan and Northeast India. Japanese officials have spoken about the potential of cooperation in a number of areas, with a special emphasis on greater people-to-people contact. It is pertinent to point out here that India being a young nation can be very useful to Japan, since it is one of the fastest-aging nations in the world today. They would require trained nurses and it is here that nurses from India's Northeast region with adequate knowledge of the Japanese language can serve the aging population in Japan. This service will be badly required in the years to come, and nurses from the Northeast can be pressed into service to fill the void in Japan.

During Bangladesh President Abdul Hamid's visit to India in 2014, Narendra Modi had said that the Act East policy would begin from Bangladesh. The conclusion of the land boundary agreement between India and Bangladesh created a positive environment to take forward an ambitious agenda of rail and road connectivity, inland waterways, coastal shipping and energy cooperation, etc. Placing Bangladesh at the centre of discussions on development plans for Northeast India will be greatly beneficial, since close cooperation between India and Bangladesh for the road, railway and waterway transit can reduce transport cost and travel time in connecting Northeast India and rest of India by land as well as water. This then makes the policy more viable economically.

Presently, what is of immense significance is that China has been successful in taking big strides in going forward with its projects; India, on the other hand, has missed several deadlines (Dayal 2018).[14] However, it is too early to conclude that India is left far behind while China has gone ahead with scripting a new chapter in its relations with Myanmar. But certainly, it is a wakeup call for India to undo its reputation, which is presently marred by tardiness in project implementation. It is high time for India to take cognisance of the outcome stemming from China featuring considerably in the national calculations of Myanmar and Myanmar's bandwagoning with China, and India urgently needs to put in place a well-coordinated approach to secure the maritime and land neighbourhood of the Bay of Bengal and Northeast India. A careful consideration of the practical aspects of their implementation and operationalisation in areas with difficult terrain, air or water connectivity may be considered more feasible. For realising the maximum potential of the connectivity links, it would also be beneficial to integrate the various projects that have been planned so far (Chatterji et al 2015). For an optimal outcome, a thorough appraisal of the objectives that underlie the initiatives taken so far must be undertaken. And spell out in exact terms and what is expected from increased connectivity so as to develop specific outcomes (Jacob 2010), while at the same time ensuring that greater linkages with Southeast Asia appear as an opportunity and not as an additional source of dilemmas. As a matter of fact, the regeneration of the Northeast through increased trade, the tackling of insurgency, the China factor and the increased transportation links are all related.

Therefore, what can be concluded is that although increased connectivity has its own advantages, it also has its own set of vulnerabilities. While the opportunities that connectivity will bring about are evident, they must be translated into action plans so that an enabling environment in areas such as energy, skill development and environment can be created. Only then can the people and the governments in Northeast India, who must be made major stakeholders in the entire idea of connectivity leading to greater commerce, benefit from transforming Northeast India into an economic hub.

Culture

Prime Minister Modi's emphasis on the use of soft power when he said in Myanmar, 'From the legend of Rama to the wisdom of Buddha our ties are founded on a shared cultural heritage' (Press Information Bureau 2016), holds immense potential and great relevance if harnessed wisely. Bringing events such as the British decision to exile the last Mughal emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar of India to Myanmar after the revolt of 1857 where he breathed last, Yangon's Kalibari temple, the 12th-century Ananda Temple in Myanmar's ancient city of Bagan etc., to reflect shared history is well known and recognised. Together with the shared heritage between India and the ASEAN countries, ranging from Borobudor to Angkor Wat, the spread of Indian mythology and folklore, Indian assistance for the restoration of monuments etc., are documented.

However, the cultural and traditional heritage between Northeast India and the ASEAN countries have remained unknown and uncultivated. Although the centrality of culture in deepening close bonds between the people of the two countries are being highlighted in recent times, much remains to be done to carry forward the vision of the Cultural Exchange Program for the period 2017–2020. Initiatives such as the India-ASEAN Students and Media Exchange programs, the Ramayana Festival, and the India ASEAN Film Festival and Cultural Festival in Goa point to an inclusive approach in the policy that seeks to taps on India's cultural footprints in Southeast Asia as part of its soft power. Here it must be mentioned that India's cultural diplomacy has not been smooth sailing. For

example, the Nalanda University is a grim reminder of India's domestic politics and bureaucracy, which can cause delays and misunderstandings in regional projects and even undermine the friendship, goodwill and the very purpose that these projects seek to advance.[15]

While positioning India's Northeast in the Act East policy, it is crucial to understand the region not just as a physical space but also as a social and cultural space, the implications of marginalisation of the people and as a zone of vulnerability in terms of both traditional and non-traditional security dimensions. Again, since opening up of the Northeast region to Myanmar would have a considerable impact on the border communities, that necessitates a better appreciation of the border areas and how these communities will respond. While the drawing of the border constituted barriers to economic exchanges and livelihoods while dividing cultures and families, in many cases the ethnic and historical connections between the people living along the border have not been entirely broken.

For example, the Kukis living on both sides of the border move freely following the tradition of visiting relatives or friends (*lailen*)[16] at night to discuss family matters or to pay a goodwill visit. Even friendly football matches are held across the border from time to time. The shared ties can be used to establish links with Myanmar, given the fact that the ethnic bonds are the oldest connections between India and Myanmar. Owing to the similarities in terms of food, weaving styles, hunting practices and all other shared linkages between Southeast Asia and India's Northeastern states, cooperation agreements to promote closer cultural and trade affinity should be considered seriously. However, the prospects of trans-national cooperation are possible with the cooperation of the communities that inhabit the borderland. Therefore, a better appreciation of the border states, border areas and border people is critical to the understanding of the entire process. Hence, paying attention to the significance of shared geography, unique configurations of ethnic, political, social and economic attributes, understanding the many forms of human activity, social practices and their corresponding connections with the people across the formal boundary will be a step in the right direction. Additionally, India can also refer to the Southeast Asian roots of the Tai Ahom, and convert the Northeast region into a soft power resource bank.

The fact that one of the agreements between India and Myanmar focuses on traditional medicines again highlights the importance of India's

Northeast, since it is a storehouse of indigenous medicines. The inclusion of the experience and traditional practices of the indigenous communities that are repositories of decades of observational data and experimental knowledge can be very useful. Similarly, educational institutions in the region can play a very important nodal role. Teachers specialised in Southeast Asian studies can be employed in developing Southeast Asian programs and language programs in the universities of the region. Research projects can be taken up on the origin and dispersion of populations, cultural connections, folklore, languages, myths of origin and belief systems etc. Exchange of students and teachers can be encouraged so that advantage of the social and cultural capital established from these contacts to enhance collaborations on more than one front. Targeting development programs where it is needed most and ensuring a two-way exchange is important, whilst ensuring the efficient implementation of joint projects will be critical.

An ASEAN Study Centre has been set up at the North-Eastern Hill University in Shillong. A three-year vision project focusing on cross-border trade, security and the ASEAN-India relationship has been developed for this Centre. The documentation centre serves as a storehouse to information on literature and culture of the ten ASEAN countries. As first of its kind in the region, the ASEAN Centre has seen a number of academic exchanges being held in the form of workshops, seminars, conferences, distinguished lectures, etc. Screening of documentaries and films on ASEAN and various aspects of India for a comprehensive understanding that could lead to mutual understanding and exchanges between the two have been staged. It has been successful in drawing academicians from neighbouring countries.

Likewise, the Buddhist monasteries of the region can be included as part of the annual visits made by Asian pilgrims. In this way, greater interactions can be cultivated, leading to an increase in trade, commerce and tourism. Northeast India offers distinct opportunities in almost all major areas of tourism such as adventure, eco-tourism, wildlife, wellness tourism, tea tourism, pilgrimage and cultural tourism. There are several attractions such as Blue Mountain or Phawngpui (Mizoram), Palak Lake (Mizoram), Kangla Fort (Manipur) and Majuli (the river island in Assam) to name a few. However, for all of this to translate to reality, the infrastructure, connectivity and service sector will have to be upgraded, keeping in mind

the fact that this region is a seismic zone and therefore any construction will have to be friendly to the environmental needs.

What can be deduced from the above discussion is that by tapping the domestic drivers, there is considerable scope to activate India's cultural diplomacy to provide necessary backup to its economic initiatives and strategic moves. But the critical test lies in overcoming the challenges, and more importantly, walking the talk. Unless that is done, it is likely that the policy will continue to have limited relevance in the context of India's Northeast.

Conclusion

Unlike the fact that China's expanding role raises questions of national sovereignty across the ASEAN countries, India is seen as a benevolent power. India, however, cannot continue to remain complacent with this image. It is high time to show resolve in terms of fulfilling the commitments it makes, strengthen its existing leverages derived from geography and address the hurdles that come in the way of accruing the development benefits, generation of revenues etc. While the new political, social and cultural spaces permit new forms of social interaction and renegotiation, it is important that India strengthens its ties with Myanmar in a manner that demands a stronger response from India than seen so far. India should simultaneously prepare its Northeast region for a hare sprint feat to participate in the Act East policy. A good beginning would be to recognise the power of now in baiting India's Northeast as a theatre for the execution of the policy's trident arm – commerce, connectivity and culture. After all, the key to ensuring the effectiveness of the Act East policy lies in the implementation of the policy.

Notes

1 See Ministry of External Affairs, 'Opening statement by Prime Minister at the 12th India-ASEAN summit, Nay Pyi Taw, Myanmar', *Media Center*. New Delhi: Ministry of External Affairs, November 12, 2014.

2 See Ministry of External Affairs, ‘Prime Minister’s remarks at the 9th East Asia Summit, Nay Pyi Taw, Myanmar’, *Media Centre*. New Delhi: Ministry of External Affairs, November 13, 2014.

3 See Ministry of External Affairs, ‘Keynote Address by External Affairs Minister, Shri Pranab Mukherjee at the 9th Asian Security Conference on “Security Dynamics in Southeast Asia: Emerging Threats & Responses” organised by IDSA’, *Media Center*. New Delhi: Ministry of External Affairs, February 9, 2007.

4 See ‘Anti-railway protest announced in Meghalaya’, *New Indian Express*, June 16, 2017.

5 Ministry of External Affairs, ‘India-Myanmar Joint Statement issued on the occasion of the State Visit of Prime Minister of India to Myanmar (September 5–7, 2017)’, *Media Center*. New Delhi: Ministry of External Affairs, September 6, 2017.

6 See Ministry of External Affairs, ‘India-Myanmar Joint Statement during the visit of the President of Myanmar to India’, *Media Center*. New Delhi: Ministry of External Affairs, August 29, 2016.

7 See Prashanth Parameswaran, ‘The truth about India’s militant strike in Myanmar’, *The Diplomat*, June 15, 2015.

8 See Shaurya Karanbir Gurung, ‘Heavy casualties reported in Army’s firefight with Naga insurgents alongside Myanmar border’, *Economic Times*, September 16, 2017.

9 See ‘Tension along Manipur Border after Myanmar Army’s Demolition Drive on No Man’s Land’, *The Wire*, January 1, 2018.

10 See Ministry of External Affairs, *Address by the Then External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee at the Institute for Security and International Studies, Chulalongkorn University on ‘India’s Look East Policy: Implications for Thailand and South East Asia’*. New Delhi: Ministry of External Affairs, September 14, 2007.

11 Ministry of External Affairs, *Official Spokesperson’s Response to a Query on Participation of India in OBOR/BRI Forum*. New Delhi: Ministry of External Affairs, May 13, 2007.

12 See ‘India pitches Asia-Africa growth corridor in a bid to counter China’, *The Indian Express*, May 24, 2017.

13 Embassy of Japan, *Address by Ambassador Hiramatsu at the Inauguration Session of ‘Japan-India Coordination Forum on Development of Northeast’*. New Delhi: Embassy of Japan, August 3, 2017.

14 See Raghu Dayak, ‘India must walk the talk with ASEAN’, *Jakarta Post*, January 27, 2018.

15 See Nirmala Ganapathy, ‘George Yeo quits as Nalanda University Chancellor’, *Straits Times*, November 26, 2016.

16 Kuki term for such visits.

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3 Act East policy and emerging economic geography in India's Northeast

Rakhee Bhattacharya

Political economic transition in India post-2014 has set new goals, imagination and debate on regional cooperation in both academia and policy circles. ‘Soft balancing’ and ’neighbourhood relation’, and increasing

economic cooperation through a renewed and reframed dynamics of geography and logistical space has gained

attention in India’s domestic and foreign policies. The ‘Act East’ policy is therefore loud enough to concretise economic cooperation with Eastern and Southeastern neighbours, engaging Northeast India. To ‘achieve’ the goal, the State affair has become remarkably proactive in Northeast India, the borderland, which connects these

neighbours through geographical contiguity, and therefore is perceived as the most viable ‘economic corridor’ and the ‘logistical space’. This necessarily is transforming Northeast India and its landscape, with ‘connectivity’

as the buzzword. The region, which until recently has been bedevilled with many cross-border and internal

security problems, is now at the interface of geopolitics and geo-economics. The paper aims to understand

critically this new role of the State and the evolving contestation. It then goes beyond to look for a scope to reframe the role and position of Northeast India and its people to negotiate and strike a balance for such new

realities in the name of regional cooperation.

Introduction

As a large number of states across the world are persuasively competing for economic and strategic partnership, regional cooperation continues to be recognised as having many cutting-edge dimensions. The concept started to

unfold and emerge pronouncedly since the early 1990s to encounter the forces of neoliberal economic order. As the globalisation has been pushing various less developed nations towards the peripheral spaces with various

exploitative economic agents and activities, regional engagements and alignment amongst these groups of nations became pertinent and many were created under duress. This is primarily a State affair, and the strength of

regional engagements is driven primarily by the grammar of commerce and by the logic of regional economic

opportunities, while the issue of security also plays important dynamics. The balance of power among the member States, as pointed out by Desai, and their respective political structures and processes determine the

conditions, functioning and success of various such regional cooperations and engagements

(Desai 2010). The explosive growth and trajectory of the idea of regional cooperation for the last quarter

century could be counted among the most important developments in the world political economy (Dash 2008) to

reshape the balance of power, and also to imagine the importance of geography in economic integration. Such

growth of regional cooperation is pushing the States to produce new geographies and re-imagine various peripheral spaces as significant determining spaces for economic activities, expansion, engagement and integration, and then to add to the nation's domestic agenda of growth. This is giving rise to various regional entities, along with

the idea of new economic geography becoming important in such dynamics. The idea of new economic geography was

developed by Paul Krugman in 1991 to link the concepts of geography and trade. He pointed out that 'economies are not dimensionless points in space' (Krugman 1991). Geographies thus are significant in producing agglomerated and contiguous spatio-economic activities and engagements, even beyond borders. Geographical locations can

potentially enhance economies of scale and necessarily can encounter the idea of the flat world of the global

economy, where core nations predominated and exploited the peripheral spaces to create asymmetric development

outcome.

In Asia, the concept evolved and expanded fast in the last quarter century, not only for greater contemporary need of trade promotion, but also for the pursuit of non-economic objectives such as regional stability and

protection against both external security threats and internal cross-border conflicts. Various states in Asia

thus started to look for partnerships with new members by going beyond the conventional old allies and spaces,

and sometimes even renewing the old allies. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is one such

successful regional entity in Southeast Asia, and is currently a major force behind several successful economic cooperations between the Southeast Asian nations and rest of the world. The State developmental model of

Southeast Asia has exemplified economic success through trade promotion and infra-link development. This has

prompted various non-member nations to promote interaction with ASEAN on such issues as the economy. The other

Asian regional entities, like Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), Asia Pacific Trade Agreement (APTA), the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), the South Asian

Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), Bangladesh China India Myanmar Forum for Regional Cooperation

(BCIM) and Mekong Ganga Cooperation (MGC), are some initiatives which have evolved over time in the Asian

landscape for developing deeper cooperation and engagements amongst member nations. All these arrangements are

primarily State affairs, and have clear political economic dynamics, while laying out the role and significance of economic geography.

India being a rising economy has already become a member of many such regional entities, and has created various levels of engagements for last quarter century. The idea of such regional engagement has now set new goals,

imagination and debate in policy space with the political-economic transition in India post-2014. ‘Soft

balancing’[1] through

‘neighbourhood first’ and ‘economic integration’, with the reframing dynamics of geography

and by creating logistical spaces for the production and market network, have gained significant attention in

balancing India’s power relations in Asia as against China’s continuous push for unipolarity in the region. In

this regard, regional cooperation with the Eastern and Southeastern neighbours was reincarnated with the

pronouncement of the ‘Act East’ policy in 2014. With this, India is loud enough to announce its mission to

integrate with the economies of Eastern and Southeastern neighbours by reframing the geography of the Northeast as a ‘heart’ of this integration. Though the content of the Act East policy so far has not necessarily revealed any new and path-breaking narratives on regional cooperation, it certainly has aimed to make the space of

Northeast more relevant and meaningful towards this policy. The channels of action accordingly have objectified the Act East policy through the idea of broadening and changing the narrative of the geography of the Northeast by creating infra-links and its paramount importance in creating an economic corridor and sustained engagements with East and Southeast Asia. In this regard, a number of State affairs are notable in setting a new normal for the Northeast. Though this objective was in focus for the last quarter century within India (the erstwhile Look East policy), unlike in the past, the Act East policy in the last four years has become successful for raising

general hubbub to move beyond past rhetoric. In the context of this new State affair, the central argument of

this chapter is to understand India’s shifting strategy of the political economy of regional cooperation, where the geography of Northeast is

significantly reframed in the State's imagination as a linking and transnational

space. The chapter also aims to understand the probable implications of the Act East policy and its ramification in local spaces of the Northeast.[2] The structure of the chapter is as follows.

I. Structural shift in policy space, economic cooperation and democratising sub-region;

II. Emerging economic geography and reframing the periphery; and

III. 'Localism' in transnational space.

Structural shift in policy space, economic cooperation and democratizing

sub-region

The political winds in the contemporary Western nations of Europe and the United States of America are shifting towards the idea of nationalism after a decades-long push for seamless economic cooperation and

interconnectedness, reaching its peak during the globalisation period. Though this new shift is 'less an

ideology' and more a strategy for political discourse, it is expected to have an adverse effect on trade relation and other subsequent economic cooperation amongst the nations (The Harvard Gazette 2017). This move of the United States is tending towards a 'trade war' with a new set of tariffs on imports from other nations like China, and such protectionism is bound

to affect the trade volume at length. This move to protect the domestic economy by

creating local jobs is short-term political populism. This contemporary policy of

protectionism on trade and mobility by the West is expected to push Asian nations to integrate more at regional levels to consolidate their economic outreach. On the other hand, there is a revisit of State developmental

models in contemporary Asia, especially in China on its Road and Belt initiatives and infra-links. This has

fabricated the meta-idea of connectivity in the Asian landscape to generate a nuanced and purposeful

transnational economism. In this meta-idea of connectivity, various peripheral spaces are becoming new sites for economism, transit and corridor, and are also creating a new debate to dismantle the frame of core-periphery. In this context, India's Act East policy vigorously aims to construct multiple connectivity and infra-links, both

within and beyond the borders and to create a congenial transnational economic space and to integrate with the

economies of Eastern and Southeastern nations. This objective is persuading India to make a structural shift in its political economy of regional cooperation with a nuanced dimension in economic geography by identifying

various potential local, regional and peripheral spaces as significant.

In this regard, State developmentalism is more a political strategy, where connectivity, capital and corridor are imagined as initial conditions to make economic geography viable; and in this alternative narrative, the

strategic peripheral spaces are reframed to woo the people towards the benefits of the trans-border economic

corridor within a broader Asian network. The idea of creating an economic corridor in South Asia is a relatively new concept and was proposed by the Asian Development Bank in 2014. This is in view of the ASEAN model, which has successfully exemplified a model for ensuring economic corridors, and enhancing integrated and agglomerated

economy and market in the 1990s. This has become a successful model of the regional economy as against the

globalised model of the West. Around the same period, India also initiated its Look East policy to make a

paradigm shift from the Statist Soviet model to a market growth model. Over time, it gained a certain degree of economic power in the Asian subregion through cooperation, multilateralism and strategic partnership, especially with the ASEAN. But as I have argued elsewhere, geography and its contiguity have not played any significant role in India-ASEAN relations in the era of the Look East policy (Bhattacharya 2017). India gained from those States and regions, which geographically remained far off from Southeast Asia, and could attract investment and business with good governance, good infrastructure and a business-like approach. The Western, Southern and even Northern states of India were the key players in that economic engagement and had taken away the lion's share of capital from countries like Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia and Japan. This asymmetry had created a new binary between

progressive and regressive regions within the larger core-periphery structure. The regional disparity was widened accordingly in terms of trade, Foreign Direct Investments (FDIs), Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) and

tourism (Bhattacharya 2015). In this unequal space, the Northeast continued to be stereotyped as a backward,

regressive, conflict-prone region with infrastructural and governance failure and remained an 'outsider' in such economic policy shifts (Bhattacharya 2017). The Look East policy thus was insensitive to naturally advantageous geographical locations, and always underpinned

economically progressive regions. The policy eventually also encouraged the advanced regions of India to produce new geographies as enclaves of capitalism.

Thus, Special Economic Zones, National Capital Regions and Smart Cities were created as the sites for FDIs and

exportable surplus. This has utterly marginalised spaces like Northeast, which actually was the potential

geography for the East and Southeast Asian investment.

With the shift in India's political economy in 2014, cross-border economic engagement has reached new heights.

While India continued to strengthen economic engagement with the advanced nations of Southeast Asia as its

allies, like Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia, it also aimed to build relationships with the other peripheral

nations of Southeast Asia like Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar. In this regard, to strengthen the economic

policy issues at both bilateral and multilateral areas with all these countries, the role of economic diplomacy has also been gaining momentum. This 'economic statecraft' has been trying to advocate and negotiate with renewed set of policies on business, trade, investment and other economic engagements. Thus, the role of India's economic diplomacy is scaled up for many international policy agendas, sometimes even by cutting across the domains of

political, cultural and strategic factors with this group of nations. India has focused on the promotion of trade and investments, management of aid and other financial flows, tourism promotion, political visits and

bilateralism, and also on the management of all the regulatory issues that affect a country's external economic policy. Such proactive roles towards its external economy were parts of India's larger shift in the policy agenda to

become a leading regional economic partner. With such changing contours of economic diplomacy, India also has focused on bilateral relations with its immediate neighbours for the long-term agenda of economic relation. For example, in the year 2016, as the Indian State had passed the historic Land Boundary Agreement Bill of 1974 with Bangladesh, it ensured the credibility of the State to resolve and establish a new faith in cross-border

relations with Bangladesh. Such a proactive policy to leverage the expanding scope of Act East policy definitely underscores a very strong regional dimension in it. Various channels, as pointed out by Rao, other than State

diplomacy, like non-state diplomacy, corporate diplomacy, business diplomacy, NGO diplomacy and Track II

diplomacy have found their places in the lexicon of economic diplomacy in India's contemporary outward-looking, liberal, macroeconomic framework (Rao 2011). Thus, a committed and accountable diplomacy through an evolved modus operandi is now aiming to create a larger scope for economic engagements within Asia through labour mobility,

higher trade, and other engaging economic flows through closer networks of physical, business, financial and

human capital. As India's regional engagements created the potential for political trust and goodwill for

long-term understanding and stability, they also need to underpin, most importantly, the emerging democracies of the neighbouring nations.

The political changes in both Myanmar and Bangladesh have given a scope to unfold the democratic space in this sub-region, which was under the heavy State militarisation for a long time, which affected India's Northeast.

This entire sub-region of Bangladesh, Myanmar and India's Northeast have about 257 million

people, with a huge natural resource base and multiple transits and connecting points and routes for

transnational mobility. Unfortunately, this whole region has been a site for conflict for a long time, and has

been severely affected with economic and human security issues. About 70 million people in this region are still living below the poverty line (27 percent), and about 160 million people are internally displaced with land and livelihood threats. These figures necessarily will be manifold with the large-scale displacement of the Rohingya community in Myanmar in the current period, who fled the nation to escape state persecution in 2017. They have

crossed the border and mostly moved to the Cox Bazar area of Bangladesh, and are undergoing a terrible

humanitarian crisis and statelessness. With such state militarisation, the issues of poverty, hunger and

malnutrition become alarming in the sub-region. Out of 149 nations, the Sustainable Development Indices in the

year 2016 in India, Myanmar and Bangladesh were respectively 110, 117 and 118, having issues of health, hunger

and malnutrition at the top (Sustainable Development Solution Network 2016). As the military regime of Myanmar

has been inhuman to even Persons of Indian Origin (PIO), about 4 lakhs of them have faced similar apathy from the State, and many are stateless now. They belong to many ethnic groups from states including Bihar, Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh and Punjab. Such an unforeseen ultra-nationalist approach of Myanmar and its blind

discrimination against various such marginalised communities even in the aftermath of political democracy is

highly unfortunate. The nation’s transition to democracy is therefore sometimes now termed ‘flawed’.

Nevertheless, an engaged regional cooperation is a need of the hour, where neighbouring nations can extend

support to create a roadmap for political stability and sustainable democratisation process. India can

essentially play a more persuasive role with its time-tested democratic institutions. Unless this sub-region of Asia contains such challenges, it cannot create a meaningful economic cooperation, while there is no denial of

the fact that this geographical intersect can be crucial in rising geo-economic dynamics with an emerging market and connected space for higher economic returns. This involves member countries’ perceived opportunity cost of

participation in different regional proposals and negotiations. This regional game can create ‘like-minded’

states to share both world and regional views and values, and can leverage the benefits of liberal order for

‘capable democracies’ (Lu, Eder and Kiri 1998; Jain 2013). In this regional game, geographical space can play a more natural and meaningful role towards the goal of peacebuilding measures and stability to benefit local spaces and their people.

Emerging economic geography and reframing the periphery

One of the apparent focuses of the Act East policy is on the interlinking of natural geographical spaces, the opening of old routes and transits, and creating new connectivity and engagements for larger mobility and

networks of people, product and capital with the Eastern and Southeastern neighbours and then strengthening the peripheral spaces. All these objectives have essentialised the geography of the Northeast as an important strategic ‘connecting gateway’ and then sought to establish a sustainable relationship of physical and economic conditions for production network and resource regimes. This ideational change is in relation to

changing socio-political objectives, which goes beyond the dynamics of global response to increasing knowledge, improved skills and techniques. This changing perspective of the state is embracing the approach of economic

geography to concede the diversity of the ‘border region’ Northeast and its basic resource and strategic

potentials for economic integration with East and Southeast Asia. Looking at the increased economic integration of Central and Eastern European countries with the European Union since the 1990s, Peter Nijkamp and Iulia

Traistaru argued that the spatial implications of this process have been little investigated, but have played a significant role in terms of the patterns of regional specialisation, industrial concentration and related

economic performance. They also categorised the winning and losing regions, and showed the adaptation processes of the border regions, which are normally the most contentious ones in such an integration process and

transnationalism (Nijkamp and Traistaru 2017). As the ‘border region’, the Northeast was imagined as a peripheral space in the post-colonial period, and there has been a remarkable disparity in both the policy and outcome on

economic development, transportation, production and trade networks for many decades. India’s Act East policy

aims to remove such disparities and to create the potential for economic development of this space. This new

grammar of economics is transforming the subjectivity of this borderland towards a geo-economic narrative and is being addressed rather too aggressively by making a structural shift in the idea of Northeast towards a

‘connecting gateway’ for economic engagements. The logic of such shifts in this idea is that the politics of

space and fixity of artificial boundaries around the old narrative of the power structure and national security for this constructed geography of the Northeast had the ramification of landlockism, isolation, economic

backwardness and infrastructural asymmetry. All these precisely kept this space at the margins of the dominant

national economy. As there is a revived initiative of the Indian State to reframe the region as a connected

space, the stereotypical idea of ‘periphery’ is gradually being replaced and reframed as a ‘heart’ and ‘hub’ of India-ASEAN relations. The Ministry of Road Transports and Highways thus created a road construction company

called National Highway and Infrastructure Development Corporation Limited (NHIDC) in 2014 and proposed a

19,903-km stretch of road construction within Northeast and across its borders. This was initiated by the state in 2006 under the Special Accelerated Road Development Programme for Northeast (SARDP-NE) and aimed to build a

6,500-km road infrastructure in this space. The new State proposal is more than a three times increase, and looks for the economic corridor and international transit approaches through the Northeast. Through an ‘integration of financial market’, about Rs 1.01 lakh crores is expected to be raised to achieve such ambitious road

infrastructure in the Northeast. Various International Financial Institutes like the Asian Development Bank are jointly working towards such negotiation of space and ‘geography of capitalism’, the idea which was largely

explored by Adam Dixon. He points out that the changing geography of capitalism due to the

integration of global financial markets has undercut the boundary of necessary logic to maintain a national

system of production, national varieties of capitalism and national system of social protection. This act of

nation-states to outsource capital and supply chains is reframing the loci of national production systems, and

this new economic geography is bound to create more complexities in the changing relationship between

contemporary states, firms, global financial markets and society (Dixon 2014). The fast transforming landscape of the Northeast is also emerging towards such complexities with multiple players, where the Indian nation-state is facilitating it. With this changing landscape and multiple connecting networks, the distance differential of the Northeastern states with other parts of India is expected to be reduced, and at the same time, space is imagined as an emerging economic corridor and transnational connectivity corridor between the Asian neighbours. The three such major trans-Asian connectivity projects which directly touch the geography of the Northeast are:

I. The Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project, which was formalised in 2008 for linking Calcutta and Mizoram to Myanmar through both highway transportation systems and inland waterways to the Bay of Bengal through Sittwe port.

II. The 16,300-km India-Myanmar-Thailand trilateral highway project to link from Moreh to Myanmar to reach Moe Soe in Thailand. This is popularly known as Moreh-Tamu-Kalewa Road.

III. The 81,000-km-long Trans-Asian Railway Network is to connect Northeast India to Myanmar.

With the completion of these trans-Asian connectivity projects, India will be able to create a parallel narrative of the Belt and Road initiative of China to integrate South and Southeast Asia for regional engagements, where

the centrality of the geography of the Northeast is going to be significant. This reframing of geography from a periphery will necessitate the State to recast the Northeast in relation to Southeast Asia through various

channels like people-to-people, business-to-business and other Track II means. Interestingly, at this hour, the regional political dynamics of the Northeast are converging with the national political regime on this issue of change and development. The recent political verdict in 2018 in three states of the Northeast, i.e. Assam,

Tripura and Meghalaya, clearly can map the aspirations of the people, as the push for State developmentalism and connectivity has reached new heights for creating a new normal here. This is a departure from the past, and

policy initiatives to ‘mainstream Northeast’ through such geographical transformation is happening for the first time with so much noise. For example, the Global Investment Summit, held in Assam in 2018, is one such important political event of that scale where regional and national leadership were at the platform to woo global capital in the Northeast. Guwahati was projected as the actual epicentre of growth in Southeast Asia through investments, opportunities and transformation. Assam was shown as the important geographical space of the Northeast towards the neighbours like Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Myanmar, Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh.

This extended transnational space has about 800 million people, signifying the potentials of the market and

economy. About 200 Memoranda of Understanding were signed to raise Rs 1 lakh crores capital from neighbouring

nations to make the geography of the Northeast effective in the Act East policy (Kashyap 2018).

`Localism' in transnational space

This ‘effective use of geography’ is expected to change this space with larger supply chains, financial markets and production networks. It will be intriguing to see how such changes will integrate the Northeast economy for good or bad, and how this border space is going to adopt such changes. Will the State be able to create any

sustainable economy within this reframed geographical space, or is it going to be an extractive authority like

the earlier regimes to make space a ‘resource curse’? At this hour of transition, it is important to

conceptualise this contemporary situation more deeply to understand the state affairs in the Northeast through

the interface of negotiation, debates and contestation. The mega-connectivity projects are expected to increase the trade opportunity of the state, while improving the access to food supply, employment and livelihood

opportunities in the border space of the Northeast, and are also expected to enhance local small and medium-sized enterprises in the Northeast for marketable surplus. There are variously connected and common economic and market activities across the borders of the Northeast, which existed traditionally, and are in many ways different from mainstream economies, like highland agricultural practices, traditional handicraft industries,

horticulture and plantation economy and various indigenous market systems, which are life-lines of these spaces. With a set of

thoughtful and pro-people policies, which are supportive of the ecology and tradition of this space, these

economic activities, especially in the hill areas, can be a sustainable exercise to create an ‘economic territory of different kind’ (Ghosh 2012) in this sub-region. This can support and ensure economic autonomy within the

larger state project of integration with emphasis on such local products, production and resources. Thus, growing of bamboo, tea, rubber, and various spices which are favourable to this geographical climate are also

increasingly creating a niche market in this region, while the state is increasingly attempting a convergence by invoking the policy and practice of organic farming in various traditional farmlands to create such niche

markets.

The gradual convergence of the agenda of the state, space and people may help to strengthen the idea of localism by prioritising and relocating a local identity in such transnational affairs. While in practice, as the state is aiming to create such hubs of new production regimes within the Northeast, various new policies including land

are introduced. Thus, in Mizoram, a new land policy is primarily aiming to commodify and commercialise the

traditional products and its natural resources. The range of above-mentioned items which were in state focus now have a large potential market across neighbouring areas. Similarly, its natural resources

continue to attract the attention of the capitalist state. For example, the idea of power trade with neighbouring nations has encouraged the state to generate surplus hydroelectric power through the construction of a large

number of dams, many of which are not viable in this ecological system. The region is gifted with the Brahmaputra river basin which includes about

eight rivers, and hydropower generation from this river basin has attracted the tremendous attention of the state to do gainful power trade with the neighbouring nations. About 168 dams are in the pipeline for this region to generate 50000 MW hydel power, having the potential of supplying 43 percent of

India’s total capacity. Mizoram is declared as the third power surplus state after Sikkim and Tripura. Similarly, hydrocarbon extraction for India’s energy security beyond the traditional space of Assam, towards Tripura,

Nagaland and Manipur is another contested area of such State developmentalism.

As reported, Assam-Arakan basin, under category I spreading across the states of Assam, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Mizoram and Tripura is estimated to have around 1,454.8 Million Tonne of Oil Equivalent (MMTOE) of undiscovered hydrocarbon reserves (Bilal 2018). To explore such a huge reserve, the Indian Ministry of

Petroleum & Natural Gas has announced a new Open Acreage Licensing Policy (OALP) for oil and gas exploration in 2017, which is a departure from the earlier system of a periodic auction of oil blocks by the State under its New Exploration and Licensing Policy (NELP). OALP permits the oil companies to study and specialise in certain

geographical areas and then make those areas open for exploration and production. The companies can further

extend their block boundaries if they find that the hydrocarbon channels in their designated blocks are extending to nearby underground rock layers and the adjoining areas. In brief, OALP has empowered the private oil companies to perform oil and gas drilling without prior bidding and identification of oil blocks by the State and make

India a business- and investor-friendly destination. This new policy allows the bidders to carve out areas and

express their interests where they want to drill and explore oil (Sharma 2018). This is to attract greater

foreign investment to boost oil and gas output and meet its increasing demand, and about 19 blocks are being

offered from the Northeast under OALP. With such renewed prospects of oil and gas exploration activities under

OALP auctions, the government-owned oil Public Sector Undertakings (PSUs) also plan to form a Special Purpose

Vehicle (SPV) to create a natural gas pipeline network in the Northeast for further impetus to economic

activities in the region, and with investor interest in the Northeast basins, the region is expected to see a

spur of exploration and drilling activities over time (Bilal 2018). As argued by Sharma, the private oil

companies such as the Jubilant Energy and Asian Oilfield Limited are already making entry in the region, and are exemplifying the ‘moments of the exclusionary neoliberal economy’. Thus in Manipur, two oil blocks in Tamenglong and Churachandpur districts have attracted the attention of the private companies to drill oil (Sharma 2018).

Such a state agenda is engaging with the emerging geography of capitalism through a nexus with various international agencies and private players. This structural shift in India’s political

economy has clearly and significantly given a nuanced dimension in the approach of economic geography to make the local space of Northeast more important in terms of extraction, production and trade. Interestingly, the Indian state is working with local political forces for various logistical expansion and is carefully negotiating with various local social groups like women, youth and various indigenous communities, who otherwise are potential

resisting forces. They are now the subjects of participatory governance, are new beneficiaries of the state

policies and are gradually partnering with it to find their legitimate space in such changes. So for many, the

state no longer is seen as a major perpetrator or enemy, but is seen as an acceptable partner (Banerjee 2014) in this game change.

With the rising potential of various local economies to integrate and expand with larger markets, along with various careful negotiations with local players, new oligarchs are being manifested within the Northeast. These oligarchs are creating newer economic channels through unfolding and creating a nexus with corporate capital,

political leadership and even underground militancy on construction work, tourism, retail markets and real estate business through various forms of land grabs and access to resources. This is fast changing the hill-plain binary of the Northeast and is setting new forms of inequality within the region, with lower strata of society as the

subjects of marginality and deprivation. The figure on the first urban Socio-Economic Caste Census (SECC) data in 2011 shows that highest number of households below the poverty line is in Manipur with 55 percent, followed by

Mizoram with 52 percent, as compared to 35 percent for all of India. With such a high poverty level, a large

number of people, as pointed out by Bezbaruah, are coming out of the region in search of low-paid jobs in

informal sectors, leaving the traditional practices and comforts of a close-knit community life in the Northeast.

Jobs and income-generating activities have been stagnant in the region (Bezbaruah 2015). There is, therefore, a new form of anxiety amongst the deprived section, which is evolving into a new form of contestation as

counter-development groups. They are unleashing and organising through protests, obstruction and struggle for

political effectiveness. This new form of ‘indigenous struggle’ against such coercion in the contemporary

Northeast is gaining potential to challenge the state around three aspects of needs, rights and justice. For

example, in Manipur, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, Tripura and Meghalaya, various such state projects got halted at different time periods with local ethnic uprisings. Some of the obstructions against such new developmentalism are noteworthy, like in Nagaland, where people’s resistance to oil extraction in Changpang village and creating pressure on the Nagaland government on the issue of indigenous rights over oil, is significant. Manipur, and its protest against oil exploration and dam construction like Mapithal and Tipaimukh, is also important. But the

state can always manipulate such local uprisings through negotiations, cronyism and partnering, while the

organising logic of the nation-state, as pointed out by Dixon, still claims legitimacy and relevance, and is the crucial site of economic governance and regulations. Nonetheless, such legitimacy is juxtaposed with a strong

unease in social groups and in public spheres over whether the nation-state has the capacity to deliver on its

promises and to provide opportunities to its citizens (2014). In the context of rapid

transition of the State narrative of the Northeast, a deeper understanding of its agenda is therefore essential in the discourse of academia to move towards an epistemic and normative frame to such a transition in the idea of the Northeast with a ‘superior modality’, interdisciplinary methods and a bottom-up approach, where people,

ecology and local space need be the referent objects for State’s agenda of transnational economism.

Concluding remarks

With the changing economic narratives in Northeast India from an ‘underdeveloped’ to a potentially vibrant commercial space, the geography of Northeast for the first time in the post-colonial period is projected with

such a level of significance, happenings and activities. The Northeast is central to India’s Act East policy; it is a new site for economism, which is expected to help to integrate India’s market with the East and Southeast

Asia. At this moment, as the developmental state is determined to attain this larger agenda of economic expansion by ‘inter-nationalising’ this borderland at the cost of its local space through land accumulation, construction of highways, hydropower generation, dam construction and mineral resource extraction, it is setting an exception in the policy trend for the Northeast. It is therefore important to understand who the partners of this game

change are, and how is it going to change the lives of the people of the region. Such state efforts must not lead to the creation of another version of the periphery in this space by the outside capitalists and resource

regimes. In the current economic game change, both the partnership and ownership must be negotiated for growth

and enrichment of this space. In this context, a debate on people’s choice, partnership, capacity and rights will need to be in place, as a new form of anxiety is evolving into newer contestation in the region. It will be

intriguing to probe such emerging contestation of the Northeast in the changing political economy of India’s

regional cooperation, which aims to make this space as a geographical heartland of the Indian economy.

Notes

1 Soft balancing is a contemporary and crucial component of the non-military regime in the balance of power theory in the post-Cold War era, and is becoming an attractive

strategy through which second-tier major powers are able to challenge the legitimacy of the unipolarity and

interventionism of the powerful nation and its allies. Thus, soft balancing is a conceptual product of

unipolarity in world politics. This is an evolving strategy and is yet to be concretized with a conceptual,

theoretical and methodological frame.

2 India's Northeast consists of the eight states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura. It occupies about 8 percent of

India's geographical area and is a part of Eastern Himalayan Region. The space has about 98 percent of

international borders and has been connected to 'mainland' India with only about 28 km of land from Siliguri

Corridor. The space was stereotyped as underdeveloped by the post-colonial state of India, and has been

isolated due to severe lack of connectivity infrastructure.

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4 Connecting the borders

Northeast India and Myanmar *Sonu Trivedi* Given the strategic significance of India’s Northeast region (Northeast India), India aims to make this region a pivot for its connectivity to the rest of the Asia-Pacific region by bridging the missing link via Myanmar. Regional connectivity, and creating a development corridor, has been the prime reason for initiating the connectivity projects in Northeast India. These projects are expected to boost trade and investment in the four states of the Northeast region that share borders with Myanmar. Nevertheless, there remain critical concerns which have been decisive in making these two countries with shared borders ‘distant neighbours’. In this context, the chapter argues for addressing the structural and systemic barriers coming in the way of connecting the missing links between the shared borders of the two countries.

Introduction

The shared frontiers of India and Myanmar have been a perennial source of study by scholars and researchers (such as Bertil Lintner 2012; Renaud Egreteau 2006; Thant Myint 2011; and Steinberg 2009a). But the way the cartographic division of borders has transformed these two countries into ‘distant neighbours’ has been a cause of concern for all of us. Security and stability in Northeast India have been a guiding principle behind India’s Myanmar policy which emerged out of the Look East policy in the early 1990s and the Act East policy in recent times. Nevertheless, there remain certain critical concerns. Amidst the strategic significance of the region, India aims to make its Northeast region a pivot for its connectivity to the rest of Southeast Asia by bridging the missing link via Myanmar. This has been the core argument raised in the chapter, which is also based on my earlier field trips to study the connectivity corridors between India and Myanmar.

Critical factors such as security and stability on the borders, defence and development of Northeast India, inadequate infrastructural facilities, procedural hiccups, low level of border trade, poor service delivery and ethnic conflict have largely impeded strong ties in the border regions between two countries, apparently making the shared frontiers emerge as distant ‘neighbours’. In this context, the chapter focuses on boosting connectivity between the regions of Northeast India and Western Myanmar and addressing the structural and systemic barriers in view of the opportunities available so far. Given the competitive advantages India has enjoyed until now, and before Myanmar’s reconciliation and bridge-building with the West and other regional powers such as highly competitive Japan and big brother China, the focus is on bridging the critical gaps in the missing connectivity links between India and Myanmar. This would facilitate the borders to emerge as a shared space and make the two neighbours closer to each other (see De and Ray 2013; Seshadri 2014).

Connectivity corridors

One of the objectives of this chapter is to focus on the connectivity corridors, encompassing highways, railways and waterways, and their significance in the sustainable development of the region. It is believed that

these corridors would be instrumental in connecting the borders and reducing asymmetries in the frontiers of both India and Myanmar. These corridors have been envisaged as development corridors leading to better resource sharing amongst various communities on the border. It would lead to managing diversities and reducing centre-periphery contestations leading to the devolution of power and decentralised governance; finally, it would fulfil the development aspirations of ethnic nationalities living on both sides of the border. Under this background, the following section covers the five major connectivity corridors between India and Myanmar. These have been explored to study their linkages with the development of the region and their effects on the integration of the communities living on the margins.

***I. India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway Project*:** It is a trans-border transportation network connecting the people through the regions it is passing by. There are further plans to connect it with the pre-existing roads and take it all the way to Vietnam. Presently, it is a 1,400-km highway linking Moreh (India) with Mae Sot (Thailand). The proposed highway is Moreh-Tamu-Kalewa-Yargyi-Monywa-Mandalay-Meiktila-Baw Nat Gyi-Mawlamyine-Kawkareik-Myawaddy/ Mae Sot (Embassy of India, Yangon 2017). This project has been subjected to bureaucratic and financial delays over the last several years. Its slow progress could be attributed to the lack of institutional support and government apathy (De and Jayanta 2013). Deeper regional cooperation among the three countries would speed up the development of the highway (Seshadri 2014). The new deadline for completion, however, has now been set at 2020 (Sudha 2016). ‘The key hurdle is the infrastructure inadequacies in Myanmar’ (Ranjan 2016). However, it is a significant venture, as it would connect India, Myanmar and Thailand with the Asian Highway – which seeks to link nations in Asia with Europe. It is supposed to give a boost to trade, business, health, education and tourism ties between the three countries. The Asian countries that seek to gain maximum benefit from this project are Thailand and China. Almost 5,111 km of the Asian Highway network lies in Thailand, and China accounts for 25,579 km, while India has 11,432 km.

A significant component of Indian-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway is the India Myanmar Friendship Road. The 160-km Tamu-Kalemyo-Kalewa road, also known as the India-Myanmar Friendship Road, was opened in 2001 with the support of the Indian Government. The agreement has also been reached to ‘repair and rebuild the bridges’ and

upgrade the 120-km Kalewa-Yargi segment of the road. Once completed, we can expect ‘seamless connectivity’ between Imphal and Mandalay (Seshadri 2014). The highway has been visualised as important for improving the cross-border trade; however, the Friendship Road has yet to become the busy trade route it was envisioned to be. Most of the bridges, along with the approach road, are so narrow that only one vehicle can cross at a time.[1] Some of the bridges are so frail that trucks with very limited capacity are directed to drive down the road beside the bridge and cross directly through the water flowing below.[2]

Construction work on about 69 bridges in the Tamu-Kyigone-Kalewa section has also started. Punj Lloyd and Varaha Infra Joint Venture have been authorised by the National Highways Authority of India for the construction of the road in the Kalewa-Yargi section of the highway.[3] Another component of this highway has been the India-Myanmar bus service, which is expected to enhance cross-border trade, tourism and people-to-people contacts. The trial run took place in 2015.

***II.Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project*:** The project is aimed at enhancing the connectivity between the two countries, especially with Northeast India and South-Western Myanmar. This is supposed to provide an important access point for linking not only India’s landlocked Northeast, but also a viable trade route from countries of Southeast Asia such as Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore. The project involves the development of Sittwe seaport and an inland port at Paletwa in Chin state, thereby linking Sittwe and Paletwa via upstream river navigation. It also involves connecting Paletwa through the hilly terrains of Myanmar to Lawngtlai in Mizoram through a highway (Press Information Bureau 2015). Overall, the project envisages linking Sittwe seaport to Calcutta through river, highway and road components. The project seeks to bridge the connectivity divide between India and Myanmar, which will lead to the development of trade between the two countries. It will also contribute to the economic development of Mizoram and other Northeast states, and is of strategic importance as it opens a new transport corridor between India and Myanmar. The agreement to initiate the project was signed in 2008 between the two countries. Although construction began in 2010, the deadline, in the beginning, was set as June 2015. However, after much delay, the construction of Sittwe port would be completed soon. The construction of the Paletwa inland water terminal is in the final stage. The work on the

extension of the highway connecting Aizawl and Saiha by about 90 km to the international border at Zorinpui has almost been completed.

The project not only aims at developing a connectivity corridor, but also has economic and social significance. It will also offer gainful employment to the local people. In the absence of any alternative source of income, the Kaladan project has played a positive role in improving the livelihood of the people, especially in the small township of Paletwa.[4] Nevertheless, there have been several voices raised against the socio-cultural impact of the project. In particular, the civil society groups have been active in raising their concerns for environmental assessments and social audits. However, in the absence of alternative employment and appropriate educational, healthcare, drinking water, sanitation, electricity and other basic amenities, these communities are still far behind the civilised life of the present times. It is here that the ESSAR Company has gained acceptance in a big way by the locals and they have been more than welcoming towards them (based on personal interaction with the local community, who did not want to be quoted).

In the light of the aforementioned fact, India's infrastructural projects in the bordering region with the Northeast states of the country must be given priority. Unlike the Chinese strategy, Indian soft-power diplomacy has been successful in Myanmar and it is visible particularly in Sittwe and Paletwa through the Kaladan project. Aiming at connectivity, infrastructural development, job creation and improving livelihood, it may be instrumental in the development and reducing the sense of alienation prevailing amongst the most vulnerable communities living in the sensitive region of Southwest Myanmar.

***III BCIM-Economic Corridor*:** The rationale for greater economic integration in the era of globalisation necessitated the formation of Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIM-EC) as a Track II initiative at the sub-regional level which has now graduated to Track I level. A congregation of two rising economies of Asia (India and China) and the two potential economies (Bangladesh and Myanmar), this regional initiative has much to offer as a sustainable instrument for regional integration.

As a mechanism envisaged for promoting connectivity, accelerating trade and investment and strengthening regional and sub-regional cooperation, this initiative aims to reap untapped benefits of connectivity, through

railroads and waterways in many of the virgin areas bordering these four countries. It also involves bridging the gaps in connectivity through airways and telecommunication networks. Through this multi-pronged agenda, the BCIM-EC initiative hopes to address the issues of trans-border crimes such as drug trafficking, arms trade, illegal migration and insurgency. It also aims to deepen integration through the elimination of trade and tariff barriers and greater market access to goods and services. Initially conceived as an instrument of developing a 'connectivity corridor', the BCIM-EC has now over a period of more than one and a half decades transformed itself into an 'economic corridor' focusing on integrating economies and providing greater economic assistance and cooperation amongst the member countries. The corridor aims to form a thriving economic belt with a focus on cross-border transport, energy and telecommunication networks. It is with this background that the common need for regional connectivity and building a development corridor has been identified.

However, questions are raised about the outcome of this initiative because of the Chinese intention of dominating the corridor and making it a part of its larger 'Grand Strategy' of the One Belt One Road Initiative. Transgressing the economic interests, the initiative also covers over-archaic China's geo-strategic intentions of controlling the smaller powers in the region and using it as a tool to counter the United States 'pivot to Asia' and Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). Given the mutual distrust between India and China over several bilateral issues at regional and international forums, the future of the BCIM-EC is going to be in limbo in the times to come (Sajjanhar 2016).

IV.Stilwell Road: The rationale for its renovation and benefits to Myanmar is a critical variable which needs to be taken into account. This road was constructed during the Second World War by American forces. It extends from Ledo in Assam to Kunming in China – bypassing Myanmar midway for more than 1,000 km.[5] Over the years, it has worn out due to negligence and lack of maintenance by the three countries which it passes by. On the Indian side, construction of the road is in progress to connect to Myanmar at Pangsau Pass. The road is being repaired and renovated up to Nampong in India. It is believed that renovation and re-opening of this 'historic' road is also significant because it could 'act as a growth driver for the entire region' and make the Northeast region a gateway for India's trade

along the corridor through Myanmar that runs into Kunming in China (Patnaik 2016).

There has been a proposal to reopen it as an international highway for linking India-Myanmar and China to other countries in the East. Its historic significance due to its Second World War legacy may also increase its importance as a major tourist destination in Asia. Besides boosting physical connectivity, it may also result in increased trade, commerce and investment, giving leverage to Northeast India as a pivot to its connectivity and integration with the larger Asia-Pacific.

***V*.*Rhi-Tiddim Road Project*:** This road will help to connect the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway through the Zokhawthar-Rih border in Mizoram and Myanmar, respectively. It starts from Zokhawthar in Mizoram and Rhi in Myanmar extending further up to Tiddim. The agreement for construction and upgrading of Rhi-Tiddim was signed in 2012. A detailed project report is underway to develop it. The road component will link Mizoram and Chin state, and further enhance cross-border links and trade between the two countries (De and Jayanta 2013). The road will also provide travel links between Monywa extending further up to Mandalay (for more information, please see the official website of the Ministry of the Development of North Eastern Region at http://mdoner.gov.in/). However, for harnessing its full potential, it is important to upgrade the Tiddim-Kalay road so that it could provide a direct link from Mizoram to Mandalay (Seshadri 2014).

Border trade points

Having discussed the mega-connectivity projects in the border region of the two countries, this section focuses on the border trade points, where actual trade has been carried out for centuries. India and Myanmar entered into a border treaty in 1952 to regulate the movement of people living on both sides of the border. The Treaty of Friendship, which came into force in January 1952, was based on an implicit understanding that the indigenous population at the India-Myanmar border belonging to the same ethnic group will be allowed free passage within 40 km on both sides of the border for facilitating ‘local trade and social visits’. The trade timing is supposed to be

from ‘dawn to dusk’, covering local items of daily requirement at the respective neighbouring Border Haats.[6] Although goods trading on the head-load basis has been the customary practice for a long time, the border trade agreement signed between India and Myanmar in 1994 gave it a legal framework. It is believed that ‘it serves as a life-belt to Myanmar’s sinking economy’ (Ibo 2000). Further, Singh (2007, 359) noted that: People living in the border regions have had economic and cultural links . .. This interdependence of the peoples on the two sides of the boundaries has given rise to informal channels of trade in goods and services. This informal trade has provided sustenance to the economies of the region.

This may be attributed to its high value owing to low transaction and transportation costs in the ‘porous’ border. The local trade points, however, have not been formally documented. In the absence of formal records, most of the exchanges are unofficial, and thereby have been continuing by way of informal arrangements.[7]

The Moreh Land Custom Station was officially opened in 1995 at Manipur’s border with Myanmar. The Zowkhathar Land Custom Station was officially opened at Mizoram’s border with Myanmar in 2015. Both the countries have also opened the land border crosing in 2018, which has made operational the land border point at Moreh (India)-Tamu (Myanmar) and Zowkhawthar (India) and Rikhawadar (Myanmar). This brings to an end the special land entry permission and licensed guided tour which was previously required for visitors entering the country via land routes. This move is expected to enhance trade, tourism and socio-economic development in the border regions.

Border Haats

Economic linkages and strong ethnic links between the people living along the border have helped in furthering trade links through the local trade points between the two countries. With the objective of further boosting cross-border trade, proposals to set up Border Haats have been identified at various locations in the bordering states of Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram (see Government of India 2012). Such initiatives

have been aimed at facilitating border trade, curbing informal trade and improving the livelihood of the people living adjacent to the border. Both the countries have also agreed to set up Border Haats at several mutually agreed locations, such as Nampong (Arunachal Pradesh) and Pangsu (Sagaing region).

Despite being divided by a border, the people on both sides of the border have remained united and shared cultural spaces as a result of these Border Haats, which have been a unifying point for the people of the two countries.[8] Informal trade through Border Haats helps boost local trade and increase people-to-people contact. Special mention may be made in this regard about the Pangsau Pass festival being organised over the years at Pangsau Pass in Arunachal Pradesh.[9] It is not merely for promoting tourism and enhancing the local economy, but is also a means of showcasing cultural heritage, folk art, local customs and traditions. These are indications of the shared aspirations of the people of the region to open up to Myanmar and Southwest China.[10]

Converting connectivity corridors into development corridors

The aforementioned connectivity corridors are poised to be the corridors for sustainable development of the region, so that Northeast India becomes the hub of the Act East policy.[11] The connectivity corridors are expected to emerge as development corridors facilitating trade and investment and leading to peace and prosperity for the region, having the following components:

I. Possibilities of creating a development corridor with rural development projects like Border Haats, with emphasis on agriculture, horticulture, handlooms, handicrafts and processed food;
II. Setting up of industrial corridors and economic activities at special economic zones and exclusive economic zones will transform the economic landscape of the region, equip people with jobs and usher in development;

III. Respond to economic and development aspirations of the people of the border region by focusing on the border area development projects;
IV. Capacity building and skill enhancement initiatives;
V. Medical and health tourism;
VI. Relief and rehabilitation during natural disasters;
VII. Facilitation of trade and investment in the border region;
VIII. Infrastructural development; and
IX. Peace and reconciliation in the region.

Critical concerns

Sustainable development of India's Northeast region and connecting the missing links between the people of the border regions of India and Myanmar will depend upon the successful implementation of the ongoing connectivity projects and effective implementation of border trade agreements and other memoranda of understanding signed so far. However, there remain certain critical concerns due to physical barriers and procedural lapses which outweigh its costs. These are highlighted in the following section.

I.Issue of Integrated Check Posts: How much can the Integrated Check Posts regulate the scenario? This is a critical question challenging the existing border trade points between the two countries. The setting up of a regulated Integrated Check Post at Moreh is an attempt to regulate the porous border between India and Myanmar. It has been developed by the Ministry of Home Affairs through the Land Ports Authority of India. The Zorinpui Land Check Post in the Lawngtlai district of Mizoram has been designated as an authorised Immigration Check Post for entry into/exit from India with valid travel documents for all classes of passengers. It will be an important aspect of the road component to facilitate the Kaladan project.

II.Land Custom Stations: How strategic is the setting up of the Land Custom Stations on Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project route? The location of the proposed Zorinpui Land Custom Station needs to be studied in terms of cost-benefit analyses and its feasibility to be outlined before it actually becomes operational. One Land Custom Station already exists at Moreh, while another one has been identified at Zowkhathar-Rih

on the Myanmar-Chin state border for controlling the existing trade volume. Zorinpui (Lawngtlai) in Mizoram has been identified for a new Land Custom Station on the Indo-Myanmar border for the Kaladan project, which is situated almost 287 km from Sittwe Port. Construction of the 129-km road between Zoinpuri-Paletwa and development of the 158 km of inland water transport between Paletwa and Sittwe Port have to be undertaken for commercial viability of Zorinpui Land Custom Station after its establishment and operationalisation.

Security and stability on the border

The porous border of Northeast India with Myanmar has been a flourishing ground for drug trafficking, arms smuggling, illegal migration and insurgency in the region. Cross-border trade of narcotics has been one of the main sources of income for insurgent groups of Northeast India.[12] Ethnic conflict, as well as the underground economic interests of insurgent groups on both sides of the border, has widely facilitated the sale and smuggling of drugs on a large scale (Egreteau 2006).

Illicit smuggling of arms and ammunition across Northeast India has added to the growing concern for peace and security in the region. The problem gets compounded due to the porous border that facilitates the cross-border smuggling of small arms (Kanwal and Chansoria 2010). This part of India has also been wracked by insurgency, with various groups flourishing as a result of illegal arms trade from across the borders. These groups, with the support of arms, have posed a threat to the unity and integrity of both countries. The porous borders have also been a cause of concern because of the presence of Northeast insurgent groups in Sagaing province.[13] In India, several insurgent groups have been involved in ethnic and violent clashes and illicit drug and weapons trafficking. Many of them have taken shelter beyond the Indo-Myanmar border. These insurgents, together with the rebels in Myanmar, have created troubles for both countries (Steinberg 2009b).

Defence and development of Northeast India

Development and economic prosperity in this part of India have been a guiding principle behind India's Myanmar policy. The absence of economic opportunities in the region, combined with the ongoing insurgency with cross-border linkages, has raised concerns for the overall stability and development of the region. In this regard, the proximity of the region to Myanmar offers immense opportunities. Overland connectivity with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has long been presented as a priority for the Look East policy and more recently the Act East policy, and for developing Northeast India (Downie 2015). It has the potential to strengthen closer political ties between the two countries. Policy-makers in Myanmar are deeply aware of the need to engage with India. They have expressed the need to make use of the connectivity projects in this part of India and on the borders of Western Myanmar.[14] However, the 'local actors' in Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram 'require persistence attention and skilful bureaucratic management' (Downie 2015). Thus, connectivity is vital for the development of the region as well for fostering India-Myanmar relations (Bhatia 2015).

Inadequate infrastructural facilities

The apathy of the government and inefficiency of the implementing agencies have led to uncertainty so far as border trade is concerned. In Manipur, 'the border feels more like an abandoned backwater than a potential metropolis'.[15] Besides, managing the security infrastructure of the country in the bordering areas is of prime concern;[16] frequent bandhs and road blockades by different groups led to infrastructural delays. The absence of peace and security in business premises is another matter of concern. Road connectivity, banking and financial institutions and telecommunication facilities are still underdeveloped due to the lackadaisical attitude of the governments of the two sides. These have added to the existing obstacles in enhancing border trade. It is believed that

upgrading the road infrastructure and setting up the Land Custom Stations and the Integrated Check Posts will improve the communication system, warehousing facilities and cold storage for perishable items. In this regard, the establishment of the Integrated Check Post at Moreh would provide infrastructural facilities which, to date, act as a major impediment to enhancing border trade. Upgrading infrastructural facilities and trade facilitation measures will facilitate border trade between the two countries and, therefore, requires immediate intervention.

Procedural hiccups

Bureaucratic hurdles and delays, lack of coordination, poor evaluation and monitoring and the lackadaisical approach of the government have adversely affected the implementation and progress of the connectivity projects. Financial constraints and cost escalation due to constant delays have further added to the problems. For example, the cost escalation because of the delay of the Kaladan project has been a major constraint. The overall cost is expected to rise largely due to inflation and volatility in the exchange rate.[17]

As a result of the infrastructural constraints and lack of democratic culture, the Indian private sector has also remained largely indifferent towards the business opportunities in Myanmar. One of the major issues faced by the business community and expats in Myanmar is the need to deal with a system which is based on the illegal economy and hard cash, impeding border trade through the formal channels. Fluctuating exchange rates have added to the illegal trade and unstable trading environment. The banking sector still remains underdeveloped, awaiting major infrastructural overhauling. Besides, the business opportunities presently exist largely in the informal sector; the lack of transparency and the ground rules to settle contract and labour disputes and protection of workers' rights have added to the existing problems. However, the new regime offers immense opportunities amidst the many challenges which it faces today. It still remains the world's largest untapped market in the field of telecommunications and software development. The country has also seen a boom in the real estate and automobile sector. After a long period of

economic stagnation, the country is moving towards potential investors. Because of the massive Chinese investment in hydropower and other infrastructural projects, there is all the more need for Indian businesses to step up investment in Myanmar and seize the opportunity, which might be over-powered by the other rival powers in the region.

Low intensity of border trade

One of the weakest links in India-Myanmar relations has been the low intensity at which the border trade has been progressing. Although border trade is largely guided by the local communities, in order to transform unofficial trade to the official, the formal foreign policy issue needs to be addressed before any significant change can be brought about in the border trade. Its development and potential for the region must be given primary importance. Some of the border points have been identified, and suggestions have been made for carrying out trade and setting up Border Haats in Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram. These points, when operational, are expected to boost the border trade, which at presents stands abysmally low. Most of this trade is negligible, and largely illegal and unaccounted for. However, this also shows that the border trade has huge potential for the expansion of trade between the two neighbours. Identifying new border points is a major issue involved in bridging the critical gap in border trade.[18]

Geopolitics and bilateral political issues

Bilateral issues have been a major impediment to the connectivity projects – the Rohingya issue has been a critical challenge in the case of Myanmar-Bangladesh. The unresolved border between India and China and other bilateral political issues raised at regional and international forums have been a roadblock in the proposed reopening of Stilwell Road. Territorial and water-sharing agreements have been predominant in the case of India-

Bangladesh relations. Besides, illegal migration has also been a critical area of concern between the two countries. Trans-border crimes such as drug trafficking, arms trade, illegal migration and insurgency have also added to the frustration and delay of the connectivity projects on both sides of the border of India and Myanmar.

Poor service delivery system and corruption

Poor service delivery mechanisms by the local government agencies and institutionalised violence has resulted in the lack of local people's faith in the state. The local factors have been a major impediment to the development and growth of Northeast India as the strategic 'bridgehead' and 'gateway' to Southeast Asia. A top-down approach with minimal consultation with and least involvement of the local stakeholders has also been a crucial issue in the development of the region and its connectivity with Myanmar. Bridging this gap through a bottom-up approach promises to inject a new dynamism for rising regional aspirations and India's engagement with its neighbours. Enhancing mutual interest through leveraging areas of common concern may offer a plethora of facilities for maximising business opportunities from Northeast India to Myanmar and beyond. Involvement and consultation with the local actors, such as civil society organisations, entrepreneurs, local government and insurgent groups, would result in the inclusive development of the region. Tackling corruption, colonial mindset, ethnic conflict and insurgency will go a long way in strengthening the participation of the local stakeholders for a deeper engagement with the neighbouring countries.

Corruption is also rampant. The region's economy is also dependent on funds provided by the central government, much of which is allegedly embezzled by the local politicians and bureaucrats.[19] It is this patron-client relationship which has hindered the development in the region. Any new proposal for enhancing connectivity and trade with Myanmar has been jeopardised by the local political and vested interest on both sides of the border, thereby obstructing the growth process.

Ethnic conflict

Armed ethnic groups have been fighting a long war with the government in Myanmar for the last six decades. This centre-periphery contestation has been a critical bottleneck, and posed a serious security threat to the connectivity corridors between India and Myanmar. Fighting still continues with some of the insurgent groups on the borders.

The cultural rights of the minorities in Myanmar deteriorated rapidly after the coup of 1962. Nevertheless, in the new political era, the rise of Buddhist nationalism has become a significant socio-political force there (Transnational Institute 2015). There has been a surge of anti-Muslim sentiment resulting in communal clashes, particularly in Rakhine state, where the Rohingya Muslims face prejudice and intolerance by the state authorities. Myanmar does not consider them to be their nationals, and depicting them as stateless has posed a critical challenge for the neighbouring countries, making the region unstable (Krammer 2010). In the wake of the alleged violence and repression (since 2012) in Rakhine state, several thousand Rohingya Muslims have been killed and displaced as a result of the communal clash between the Rakhine Muslims and the Rakhine Buddhists. This historic conflict has further complicated the religious landscape and tension. The relations between Buddhist and Muslim communities remain strained and potentially volatile to this date.[20]

Conclusion

These critical gaps between the two countries have resulted in Myanmar taking refuge with China; the latter has been its strong supporter both internally and also at international forums during the period of adverse sanctions imposed by the Western world. India’s ideological stand during this period widened the mistrust between the two neighbours. However, the strains and misgivings were short-lived. Renewed efforts have been made by the governments of both the countries for reallocation in the attitude during the decade of the 1980s and 1990s; henceforth, both the governments have been making efforts to bridge the critical gaps and

develop the border region as a connectivity corridor between the two countries.

The democratic transition in Myanmar has brought new opportunities for other countries. Relaxation of sanctions and establishment of a quasi-civilian regime have facilitated large-scale investments and a source of phenomenal advantages. Given China's own multi-dimensional and complex relations with the US in the wake of recent trade wars, this could certainly impinge on the former's relations with Myanmar. As per the reports, Myanmar seeks to gain from the ongoing trade war between the US and China because of the rising interest of the Chinese manufacturing and processing units to be set up in Myanmar. It was China which had somewhat stood by Myanmar in the wake of economic sanctions in the late 1980s. But the relaxation in sanctions has seemingly undercut the preponderant influence of China in the country. With Obama's 'pivot' to Asia, frequent dialogues with the US leadership as well as high-level official visits became more common, and they triggered new strategic anxieties for China, prompting a nuanced assessment of Myanmar by China. However, the absence of any concrete US policy towards Myanmar during President Trump's administration, and his added support to Bangladesh for pressurising Myanmar for 'safe and voluntary' return of Rohingya Muslim refugees, has further brought it closer to China's closet. China seems to be shielding it against the United Nations investigation report for punitive action for committing genocide on Rohingya Muslims over the years in Myanmar.

The revitalisation of Myanmar's relations with the US has also influenced Japan's policy toward Myanmar, which ultimately led to enhanced investment by the Japanese companies. It is another principal player in this multilateral scramble for power and influence in a highly competitive climate. Not to remain behind, the former Asian economic power has joined the fray by offering economic aid as well as rejuvenating investment into the newly reforming country. Its Official Development Assistance for infrastructural development and humanitarian assistance, along with massive investment in Thilawa Special Economic Zone, located on the outskirts of Yangon, have marked a strong Japanese presence in the country.

Last but not least, the development potential of India's Northeast region and Western borders of Myanmar can only be realised through

reinvigorating the infrastructural links and development corridors, which are supposed to be vital for the people living on both sides of the border.

Notes

1 Based on field trip by the author on India-Myanmar Friendship Road in January 2019.

2 See ‘ASEAN focus on Imphal-Moreh road’, *Imphal Free Press*, May 4, 2018.

3 Please see Pratim Ranjan Bose, ‘NHAI issues EPC contract for highway project linking India, Myanmar, Thailand’, *Business Line*, January 8, 2018.

4 It is based on a field trip by this author to Kaladan project sites in June 2014.

5 61 km of this road lies in India, 1,033 km in Myanmar and 632 km in China.

6 See Haokip, T. ‘Indo-Myanmar relationship on bilateral and economic cooperation’, *E-Pao*, March 11, 2013.

7 Most of the trade takes place informally through Gate No. 2 on head loads which are not documented. This is based on the field trip by the author in January 2019.

8 S. Debananda Medak, ‘Zokhawthar: A deserted space between Act East Policy and formalization of trade’, *Northeast Now*, December 13, 2017.

9 Avik Chakraborty, ‘Arunachal festival begins on high note’, *The Telegraph*, January 21, 2018.

10 See Mirza Zulfiqur Rahman, ‘Should the Stillwell Road between India-Myanmar-China restored’, *The Wire*, October 13, 2016.

11 Based on the speech by Ram Madhav at Delhi Dialogue X, held in New Delhi on 19 July 2018.

12 To know more about the porous border, please see Namrata Goswami, ‘Drugs and the golden triangle: Renewed concerns for Northeast India’, *IDSA Comment*, February 10, 2014.

13 For details, see Subir Bhaumik, ‘A close friendship that has turned sour’, *The Telegraph*, March 24, 2014.

14 See Laldinkima Sailo, ‘Northeast Myanmar’s connect’, *The Hindu*, March 14, 2014.

15 See ‘India looks to Burma to boost trade with south-east Asia’, *The Guardian*, February 26, 2013.

16 Based on interaction during a field trip at 105th Mile Border Trade zone at Muse with U Htay Oo, Chairman of Muse-Namkham Border Trade Chamber of Commerce, Muse.

17 See ‘India to complete Myanmar Port Project in May’, *The Hindu Business Line*, February 1, 2015.

18 S. Trivedi, ‘Bridging the critical gaps: India-Myanmar’, *The New Light of Myanmar*, September 23, 2014.

19 For detailed analysis, see Bimol Akoijam, ‘Making sense of corruption in Manipur’, *Imphal Free Press*, September 5, 2012.

20 S. Trivedi, ‘Bridging the critical gaps: India-Myanmar’, *The New Light of Myanmar*, September 23, 2014.

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5 Understanding Myanmar's perspective on India's Act East policy

An analysis

P.S. Ramya India has long sought to build and deepen relations with Southeast Asia. Its Look East policy, which was conceived in the 1990s, is indicative of the significance placed on developing economic and strategic relations with the region. The policy has manifested in initiating several infrastructural and development projects and the signing of several economic agreements with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries. Despite the obvious strategic significance attached to such projects and agreements, the trajectory of development and implementation has been lethargic. The criticism has been that the delayed progress of these projects is representative of the lack of policy implementation, the policy being the Look East policy. With the coming of the Narendra Modi led government in India, a new vigour was injected into the existing policy: namely, the Act East policy. Aside from being a mere play on words, the hope is that the policy creates momentum and finds a new gear in promoting ties between India and the region, specifically with a focus on Myanmar. The relations between India and Myanmar have remained stagnant for several decades, given the former’s policy of avoiding engagement with Myanmar’s military junta. However, the political change in Myanmar has paved the way for new opportunities to develop between the two nation-states. In such a context, it becomes critical to analyse how the Act East policy plays out in improving bilateral relations with Myanmar. Therefore, this chapter will attempt to understand and examine Myanmar’s perspective on the Act East policy.

The chapter will first provide a comprehensive historical background of the relations shared between India and Myanmar. The chapter will then attempt to analyse Myanmar's perception of the Look East and now Act East policy. The chapter will compare and contrast the two policies, and examine how Myanmar has responded to the two policies. The indicators of geography and history will be used to analyse Myanmar's perception of the Act East policy. The chapter also discusses and examines Myanmar's relations with China and argues why it is unfair to compare India and Myanmar relations to that of China and Myanmar relations. The chapter examines Myanmar's probable perception towards India by closely examining the goals of the former's foreign policy, and narrows it down to a combination of bandwagoning-hedging and institutionalised cooperation, respectively. Each of these policies put forth by Myanmar towards India will be critically analysed in the context of the Act East policy. The paper concludes by summarising the recent developments in India-Myanmar relations and the nature of bilateral relations in the near future.

India-Myanmar relations: Historical background

India-Myanmar[1] relations make a case for missed opportunities, despite being filled with potential. The potential is typified by geography, which plays a vital role in shaping the strategic interests of Myanmar and India. For Myanmar, its geographical location between India and China throws it into a conundrum of balancing competing interests between rising powers. The first Prime Minister of Myanmar, U. Nu, described his country's precarious geographical location as 'a tender gourd between the cactus' (International Crisis Group 2001). It is geography which creates challenges for Myanmar while providing opportunities for growth. Geography is a key driver for policy formulation on the side of India as well. For India, Myanmar forms the 'gateway' to Southeast Asia and is the only connection via land to the region. Therefore, geography must be heeded in order to understand the strategic interests that drive the two neighbours.

Apart from geography, another key variable in understanding the India-Myanmar relations is history. The two have shared historical links that predate the colonial period. A natural and organic border has existed for

centuries, characterised by free movement on both sides. In fact, the three major empires of Burma – Pagan, Toungoo and Konbaung – had strong ties with the Indian kingdoms.[2] However, the colonial period was characterised by Burma being made a province of India, which eventually led to the migrants issue.[3] In the three Anglo-Burmese wars (1824–1826, 1852 and 1885–1886), the forces from Madras and Bengal were utilised by the British against the Konbaung king. Antipathy towards the Indian community existed because Indians were usually placed in administrative positions, and also had a large business community in Rangoon (now Yangon). It can be argued that the biggest wedge in relations during the colonial period was caused by the fact that the coercive apparatus – the military – was composed primarily of Indians, with battalions coming in from the Madras Army (Nakaninshi 2013). This fed into the British policy of divide and rule, wherein the British Burma Army was composed of Indians and ethnic minorities (specifically Karens). The majority community of Myanmar, the Bamars, were systematically not included, leading to resentment which was directed towards the 'outsiders'(chiefly Indians). In 1924 and 1931, anti-India protests ensued with rioting. In light of the anti-India riots which were headed by Bamar nationalists, prominent Indian Hindus established the Aryan Veer Dal (Callahan 2003), meaning the 'brave Aryan troops'.

Following Independence from the British rule, Myanmar's civilian government was formed by the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League and headed by U. Nu, who shared cordial relations with India. In fact, U. Nu shared very close relations with the first Indian Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, wherein the former sought to glean guidance on international affairs from the latter (Gupta 2013). Furthermore, Nehru, Zhou Enlai and U. Nu together advocated for the Panchsheel principles of peaceful coexistence. In the current context as well, Myanmar still remains an advocate of non-alignment in its foreign policy, which was a policy conceived by Nehru. Parallels can be drawn between U. Nu's policy of neutralism and Nehru's advocacy of non-alignment.

The cordial relations between the two nation-states during this period are reflected in the signing of the India-Myanmar friendship treaty in 1951.[4] During the 1950s, defence cooperation was also witnessed, with Myanmar's armed forces, called the Tatmadaw, being sent to several countries including former Yugoslavia, Israel, UK, Pakistan and India for exposure and training.

Certain aspects of Tatmadaw's Defence Services Academy[5] were influenced by the Indian Army's academy in Dehra Dun (Callahan 2003). India's close ties with Myanmar in the 1950s led Nehru to arrange meetings between Myanmar and China in order to resolve the border dispute between the two nation-states (Bhatia 2015). This was a significant move on the part of India, given that Myanmar was plagued by acute civil war coupled with the presence of Kuomintang forces (KMT) within its territory. The KMT presence caused tensions between China and Myanmar, so much so that in 1950, Shan state was put under martial law. The Tatmadaw feared that China might enter into their territory, and in 1952, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) of China crossed the border and entered into Myanmar to 'annihilate KMT forces' (Hongwei 2009). Therefore, Nehru's assistance in arranging Zhou Enlai's first visit to Myanmar was highly significant in 1954 (Callahan 2003).

India-Myanmar relations can be described as like-minded up until the military coup in Myanmar, headed by General Ne Win, in 1962 (Lee 2014). The relations between U. Nu and India were so close that following the military coup, U. Nu sought asylum in India. With the coming of the Ne Win regime, Indian migrants were displaced overnight, indicating how colonial policies spilt into shaping post-independence ties between the two nation-states. It was estimated that over 100,000 Indians (Sidhu 2009) settled in Myanmar had to leave following the policy of nationalisation of private enterprises by Ne Win. This created obvious friction in bilateral relations, which was mitigated to an extent with the visit of Indian Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri in 1965. Shastri's visit was reciprocated by Ne Win, who visited India the following year (Sidhu 2009). Following the onset of the military regime, the bilateral relations oscillated between indifference and bitterness. Specifically, Ne Win's policies of isolationism created benign indifference towards Myanmar on the Indian side.

The period of the 1970s again saw a downward trend in relations, given India's engagement in the 1971 war with Pakistan that led to the formation of Bangladesh. Myanmar saw India's role in the crisis as a violation of state sovereignty and as an intervention in Pakistan's internal problem. At the same time, the relations between China and Myanmar grew closer. China by the 1970s had reduced its support to the Burmese Communist Party (BCP), and began inching closer to the General Ne Win-led regime (Myint-U 2011). Furthermore, Ne Win helped China improve its ties with Cambodia

(Ghoshal 2000). This helped Myanmar, which faced threats along its Laos border. Relations, therefore, improved between communist China and Myanmar. This is indicative of how Myanmar's geographical reality of being located between two growing powers of Asia has resulted in a foreign policy of complex balancing relations. While India-Myanmar relations were drifting apart, China seemed to become more cordial to Myanmar. Although the reasons underpinning Myanmar's relationships in the 1970s with India and China are different, they were correlated in a sense. For instance, General Ne Win's withdrawal from the non-alignment movement in 1978, on the ground that the movement had lost its original intention, can be interpreted as a move by Myanmar towards fostering better relations with China. Deng Xiaoping's visit to Myanmar in the same year improved relations between the two. In light of improving relations, China withdrew substantial funding to the BCP (Than 2003). Myanmar also frowned upon India's close ties to the Soviet Union, which was interpreted as undermining nonaligned policy.

Look to Act East policy: Myanmar's perception

In 1988, General Ne Win's regime came to an end and the Tatmadaw took direct control of the nation-state through the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC).[6] The military junta, unlike Ne Win's regime, was not characterised by the revolutionary policy of 'Burmese Way to Socialism', and hence did not adhere to the policy of isolationism as did its predecessor. This opened avenues for rekindling of relations between Myanmar and India.[7] Therefore, relations took a dramatic turn in the mid-1990s, with India taking the first step towards reinvigorating ties by launching the Look East policy. The underlying motivations for the policy stemmed from strategic, economic and geopolitical interests. Therefore, it can be stated that the rationale for formulating the policy was extremely logical, given the larger policy of liberalisation which was underway in India. The need for India to engage economically with the Asia-Pacific region, specifically with ASEAN, formed the main thrust behind the Look East policy. This, coupled with the rise of China and its growing economic

prowess in Southeast and South Asia, further propelled India to launch this policy.

India's pursuance of the Look East policy, coupled with increasing security problems in the Northeast region of the country, led to the former changing its policy towards Myanmar. The Indian government, therefore, began engaging with the junta. In fact, in 1993, the visit by Indian Foreign Secretary J.N. Dixit to Yangon (Haacke 2006) created an avenue for the two nation-states to reinitiate dialogue (both military and diplomatic), along with agreements to cooperate on issues of illicit drugs and insurgency. These moves fit into the larger rubric of the policy. However, the launch of the Look East policy was not seen very favourably by Myanmar. In 1987, Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi sought to foster ties with Myanmar. However, the meeting held with General Ne Win did not progress smoothly. Ne Win was seen as 'avuncular from the word go' and 'shooting down every proposal by India'.[8] This definitely created an impediment in operationalising the Look East policy, given the lack of participation from Myanmar. However, with Ne Win relegated to the background and the junta becoming stronger, the Tatmadaw began perceiving India more favourably from the early part of the 2000s. A case in point towards the change in Myanmar's policy from the Ne Win era was General Than Shwe's visit (the then military leader of the Tatmadaw) to India in 2010, in what was described as a 'religious' visit.[9] Ne Win's regime was characterised by a personalised leadership, and the General's unfavourable attitude towards India had a direct bearing on bilateral relations, which was not the case with the junta regime which followed.

During this period, the junta favoured relations with India in order to gain international legitimacy for the elections that were to be held that year, and hence pushed for cooperation from their end. The visit also saw General Shwe look to India for assistance in developing skills in information technology. Therefore, witnessing a slow start, Myanmar began moving towards viewing the Look East policy favourably. This stemmed from the junta's personal and strategic interests – the personal being sustaining the continued military regime within the state by diversifying international partnerships (given stringent Western sanctions), and strategic interests being attached to overcoming dependency on China.

Often, the assessment of India's relations with Myanmar is pitted against the latter's relations with China. My chapter argues that such a comparison

is not fair, given the proximity of relations beginning in the later part of the 1970s until the early part of 2000s between China and Myanmar. Several factors resulted in Myanmar moving closer to China. On the international front, Myanmar was isolated due to the sanctions regime with the coming of the military junta; China's withdrawal of support to the communist forces within Myanmar, coupled with the support it rendered at the United Nations Security Council, proved to be highly significant for the military regime which sought legitimacy. Domestically, Myanmar, although resource-rich, is plagued by the centre-periphery crisis, and China played a prominent role in the form of a mediator through the period of the 1990s when the insurgency was rampant. India, for its part, had consciously followed a policy of non-engagement with Myanmar ever since the Tatmadaw took the reins. As stated, efforts by Rajiv Gandhi to negotiate policies with Myanmar did not come to fruition, given General Ne Win's suspicion of India. This period of non-engagement from the 1960s well into the 1990s has proven to be a setback in the current context. During this very period, China played an integral role in Myanmar, creating a large footprint. Therefore, in the current context, a level playing field (in comparing India-Myanmar and China-Myanmar relations) cannot be established, given the prominent role the former had played within Myanmar for almost three decades. This is particularly visible in the defence relations, wherein data from 1990 to 2005 reveals that the Tatmadaw sent about 665 officers to China for training and learning of 163 courses, while only about nine officers were sent to India's National Defence College and Staff College (Myoe 2011).

The Look East policy in relation to Myanmar obtained a new vigour only in 2012, with the high-level visit of Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to Myanmar, following which significant initiatives were announced, such as an extension of a new line of credit (LoC) to Myanmar worth USD $500 million, setting up of the Advance Centre for Agriculture Research and Education in Yezin and Rice Bio-Park in Nay Pyi Taw. At the defence level, the Indian Defence Minister visited Myanmar, which was reciprocated with Myanmar's Commander-in-Chief of the Tatmadaw Kyi (Army) visiting India the following year (Ministry of External Affairs 2014).

Despite being logically formulated and timely in its inception, the Look East policy did not take off as expected, with several infrastructural and development projects such as the Kaladan Multi-Modal Project and signing

of several economic agreements with ASEAN being delayed. Specifically, in the context of Myanmar, several connectivity projects such as the Rhi-Tiddim highway faced multiple delays, while the trilateral highway from Kalewa to Yargyi, connecting India and Thailand via Myanmar, has been undergoing upgrades for decades. Attempts by India to harness Myanmar's hydropower potential were also unsuccessful, with the construction of dams in the Chindwin river in Western Sagaing region at Shwezaye and Tamathi being cancelled in 2013 (Lee 2014). The hydropower projects were to provide the Indian state of Manipur with 80 percent electricity. The projects were cancelled due to opposition by environmental groups and indigenous peoples, leading India to voluntarily cancel the projects. Similarly, China has also faced cancellation of projects such as the Myitsone dam, which was plagued by local protests due to the high loss of land, biodiversity and displacement. The Myitsone project was rejected by the majority Bamar community and minorities such as the Kachins. The cancellation of the project by Myanmar's former President Thein Sein was positively noted by the public at large, and drew international attention to the issue as well. Therefore, India too needs to tread carefully by charting out cohesive and complimentary projects that positively benefit the two sides. The issue of land grabbing for such projects is highly contested in Myanmar, which is understandable given that it is still grappling with the transition from authoritarianism and where not until long ago federalism was a taboo word. India's policies concerning infrastructure projects must be designed with such potential roadblocks in mind, given that Myanmar is currently in the process of formulating such laws.

The lethargic implementation of the Look East policy has led the present Indian government, headed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, to launch the Act East policy. Aside from being a mere play on words, the hope is that the policy creates momentum and finds a new gear in promoting ties between India and the region, specifically with a core focus on Myanmar. In fact, Modi described Myanmar as a 'key pillar'[10] in the Act East policy. The significance of the policy, as opposed to the Look East policy, emerges from the former adding the security paradigm into its operationalisation. In order to understand Myanmar's perspective on the Act East policy, one must go back to key indicators – geography and history.

Myanmar's foreign policy is tethered to the overtures and actions of its larger neighbours, namely India and China. This reveals the significance of

geography and its resulting impact on policy formulation. Its military regime historically has been globally condemned and has been at the receiving end of Western sanctions (Thawnghmung 2003). In such circumstances, its foreign policy has relied on befriending China and improving ties with ASEAN countries. As stated previously, India's support for the democratic movement in Myanmar placed it in an unfavourable position in the context of the junta, which resulted in the slow progress of bilateral ties, specifically in the context of the Look East policy. Therefore, another indicator (apart from geography and history) that would help analyse Myanmar's position on the Act East policy would be the politics which are manifested in its strategy towards India. The strategy adopted by Myanmar is a comprehensive amalgamation of cooperation, bandwagoning and hedging. The two underlying factors of geography and history have informed Myanmar's strategic interests. Its historical legacy of ethnic conflicts is physically witnessed in its geography, with the centre being dominated by the Bamars, while the periphery is occupied by the ethnic minorities such as the Shans, Kachins, Chins, Mons and Karens. The centre-periphery conflict has a direct bearing on its strategic interests, i.e. this becomes a case where domestic policies relay and impact foreign policies in Myanmar. This needs to be kept in mind while seeking to analyse Myanmar's perspective on the Act East policy.

The centre-periphery conflict engulfing Myanmar, together with its geographical realities of dealing with China-India and its historical ties with India, inform Myanmar's attitude towards the Act East policy. Its approach towards the policy can be examined on the basis of two policy goals: bandwagoning and/or hedging and institutionalised cooperation. The two goals characterise Myanmar's overall foreign policy towards India.

Bandwagoning can be defined as a policy that is adopted by a 'threatened state which aligns with the threatening state in order to exploit other states and permits the threatening state to enjoy disproportionate shares through such exploitation' (Mearsheimer 2009). It allows the weaker state to engage with the larger power and mitigate the balance of power crisis. In the context of Myanmar-China relations, the former has adopted a policy of bandwagoning with the latter. This policy of Myanmar can largely be attributed to the Western sanctions imposed on the state, thereby leading it to bandwagon with China. However, given its overdependency and reliance on China (as a result of bandwagoning), Myanmar has now reset its policy

and is actively seeking to engage with India. Myanmar is hence hedging with India in order to correct its dependency on China. Therefore, the two policies of bandwagoning and hedging are complementary to each other. The complementary policies of bandwagoning and hedging are integral goals in Myanmar's foreign policy as they seek to enhance the nation's security and development prospects.

Interestingly, the policy of hedging followed by Myanmar complements India's Act East policy. India's push towards signing an agreement with Myanmar pertaining to the improvement of the 'socio-economic condition' of the people belonging to the Rakhine state can be seen as a step in furthering the policy. The agreement states its intent to help the displaced Rohingya community by contributing to their resettlement and social welfare.[11] Also, unlike in the past, India has actively partaken in the peace process (pertaining to the centre-periphery dynamic) within Myanmar termed the '21st-century Panglong Peace Process'. In 2015, India's National Security Advisor Ajit Doval attended the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) ceremony, in which he was India's witness signatory (Ministry of External Affairs 2016). How far India will continue its participation in Myanmar's peace process is unknown, but it is a welcome move given that India can play the role of a pertinent interlocutor apart from China.

Specifically pertaining to trade and investment, India held the 3rd CMLV (Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos and Vietnam) Business Conclave in 2016 in Chennai (India). The main theme of the conclave was 'Myanmar as an Investment Destination' (Ministry of External Affairs 2016). This was the first time Myanmar was touted as a destination for investment in India after several decades, and hence marked a significant turn in bilateral relations in the context of the Act East policy. In the wake of Modi's visit to Myanmar in 2017, significant discussions on expanding India's role took place. India sought to increase its footprint within Myanmar by undertaking infrastructural and socio-economic projects: for instance, the agreement signed between India and Myanmar on strengthening the latter's information technology skills. The information technology skill development has been undertaken with the assistance of TATA Consultancy Service.[12] These programmes are under the purview of the Act East policy in the context of Myanmar.

Furthermore, Myanmar uses India to hedge China in sourcing credit and capital investment. Loans have been provided by India towards the development and upgrading of infrastructure projects such as the Yangon-Mandalay rail link. As part of the Act East policy, India has recently begun negotiations with Myanmar to upgrade road links between the two countries. Myanmar's hedging policy significantly reduces its reliance on China. This impacts the Act East policy positively giving it credence. However, the programmes undertaken by India are characterised by a languid pace resulting in delayed outcomes. Myanmar's bandwagoning with China, coupled with India's delayed progress in project completion, has impeded policies such as the Look East policy and continue to impact the Act East policy. The trilateral highway which links Thailand-Myanmar with India has been consistently slow. The Kaladan project has similarly been delayed. The project began nearly a decade ago, and yet the Indian state of Mizoram remains unconnected by an overland road.[13] Such instances push Myanmar to bandwagon and not comprehensively engage with the Act East policy. Moreover, the number of countries Myanmar can utilise to hedge Chinese over-dependence has increased, owing to its transition towards democratic governance. The countries which have significantly invested in the country include Japan, Korea, Germany, Thailand and Singapore. Japan especially may prove to give India tough competition in Myanmar.

Myanmar's second goal in its foreign policy is institutionalised cooperation. The policy of institutionalised cooperation specifically pertains to the challenges of drug trafficking and insurgency, which Myanmar seeks to resolve by fostering institutionalised mechanisms with neighbouring countries. Both India and Myanmar share these challenges and hence, they fit into the larger agenda of the Act East policy on India's side. Such cooperation is witnessed in the increasing defence ties between the two nations. Myanmar and India's armed forces have started engaging in training exercises and drills. Such cooperation provides hope that the Act East policy could be more successful than its predecessor, the Look East Policy. Training pertaining to United Nations peacekeeping duties was imparted by the Indian Army to the Tatmadaw in Meghalaya in 2017. It was the first training in India.[14] The fact this occurred after the 'surgical strike'[15] by the Indian armed forces in 2015 indicates that defence cooperation remains a priority for Myanmar in its relations with India.

Pertaining to the surgical strike, the Director of Myanmar's Presidential office, Saw Htaystated, stated: 'Myanmar will not accept any foreigner who attacks neighbouring countries in the back and creates problems by using our own territory'.[16] In spite of the existing issues at the border, defence cooperation has proceeded to show positive signs. The Tatmadaw's Commander-in-Chief Min Aung Hlaing visited India in 2017. The large media attention given to the surgical strike (given that the news of the strike was made public by the Indian government) hampered diplomatic ties, and such an approach needs to be avoided in the future in order to foster better relations.

The institutionalisation of cooperation has also been witnessed in terms of the border agreement between the two nation-states. In January 2018, India approved the agreement between the two countries on land border crossing (Ministry of External Affairs 2018). However, on the side of Myanmar, the agreement has not been approved, and has cited domestic compulsions as a reason for the delay. This agreement on the border crossing has been deferred twice by Myanmar in the past year.[17] One plausible reason for this could be attributed to the strained peace process in Myanmar, wherein the Tatmadaw is engaged in armed conflict with signatories of the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) in the current context. This could be a probable domestic compulsion because in 2014, the parliament of Myanmar had approved a draft of agreement of the border deal with India.[18] According to the agreement, the free movement of people across the border would not be hindered and 'citizens of India and Myanmar living within 16 kilometres of the border are most welcome to cross the Indo-Myanmar border'. The purpose of the agreement is to institutionalise and formalise the movement of the local inhabitants across the border by fencing and placing border checkpoints where passports are checked. The move is said to monitor the movement of insurgents; however, an intense backlash of resistance has come from locals, specifically in Nagaland and Manipur. The locals blame both the governments for the fencing, which would convert 35 square kilometres of cultivable land into 'no man's territory'.[19]

Myanmar, for its part, stated that the fencing it has undertaken has been incommensurate with the border agreement. A statement released by the President's office read 'arrangement to construct a border fence between

BP-145 and BP-146 is to hinder the construction of buildings in Myanmar's territory beyond the demarcation line between the two countries. It is absolutely not, for the people from both sides, to restrict the regular travel in official ways in accord with their traditions and customs' (President's Office 2018). However, the implementation of the agreement by both sides has been of the top-down approach, lacking constructive involvement of locals. Hence, the formalisation of trade (seen as a positive step) has backfired, with locals complaining of restricted access due to an arbitrary policy adopted by the security forces (on both sides) in allowing passage to people across the border. Furthermore, reports have emerged of the Tatmadaw demolishing 'illegal' constructions in Tengnoupal district of Manipur, claiming that it is on their side of the border, and this has further intensified tensions in the border area.

The tension at the border in the current context is reflective of the lacuna in the Act East policy, wherein the implementation of policies has been top-down rather than bottom-up, resulting in protests from the locals who form an integral part of bilateral relations. The people on either side of the border have historically been linked ethnically. These historic relations resulting from geography have created an organic border that fosters people-to-people connectivity. Since it is the locals who shall utilise the larger connectivity and infrastructure projects, the policy must pay heed to their interests in order to make policies such as the Act East a success.

Conclusion

India-Myanmar relations appear for the moment to be heading in a positive direction. The long-discussed India-Myanmar Friendship Bridge connecting the border towns on both sides was opened in August 2018 (Embassy of India, Yangon 2017). It is being touted as a major leap in the implementation of the Act East policy. However, as stated earlier, the border issue is more complex, given that the intricacies of an open border are attached to other issues of border-posts and monitoring of movement across the border, while continuing the free movement regime. Nevertheless, pushing for more connectivity is indeed a vital step in untying the intricate complexities at the border. In this context, defence cooperation also

becomes vital for improving ties. The defence cooperation mainly includes India providing equipment and joint border patrols. Joint patrolling in specific areas is relevant, as it enables them to tackle insurgency on both sides given the perilous peripheries along the border region. India also, as part of the defence cooperation, aims to dispatch warships to Myanmar's ports at regular intervals.[20] Tatmadaw officers were also sent under the Indian armed forces scholarship programme to India for training, specifically in computer science and information warfare (Myoe 2011). Furthermore, the two countries called for expanding maritime cooperation and 'institutionalized cooperation through regular coordinated patrolling initiatives' (Ministry of External Affairs 2017). Such initiatives promote cooperation at the internal/domestic level of challenges, and also serve the interests at the strategic level for Myanmar.

As stated, the India-Myanmar relations are influenced by the China dynamic, and the recent standoff between China and India in Dhoklam is a case in point. The Dhoklam standoff has increased the sensitivity in defence cooperation between India and Myanmar. For Myanmar, defence cooperation with India, specifically in terms of sale of military equipment and training of officers at defence academies in India, is crucial because the Tatmadaw is actively seeking to diversify its defence imports and modernise its forces. Therefore, the goal of institutionalised cooperation furthers bilateral ties and promotes the Act East policy as well. Institutional mechanisms pertaining to joint border patrolling to combat shared challenges of illegal drug trafficking across the border region is a step in this direction. From Myanmar's viewpoint, the Act East policy plays a significant role in meeting its internal and external interests. From India's standpoint, the institutionalisation of cooperation pertaining to defence is a priority area to pitch to Myanmar because other countries such as Japan are unlikely to come forward.

The Act East policy is also helping in serving Myanmar's strategic and economic needs. One glaring example is the fostering of defence ties between the two countries. Also, the agreements signed to upgrade existing infrastructural and socio-economic projects add credence to the policy. Having said this, the relevance of Myanmar in the Act East policy has been complicated given the heavy Chinese involvement within the state, and also the delayed progress of ongoing projects undertaken by India coupled with the surgical strike of 2015 momentarily straining relations. In order for the

policy to gain traction in Myanmar, India has to carefully walk the tightrope in garnering Myanmar's cooperation, despite the ongoing democratic transition within the state. This is indeed a demanding task, because India has long supported the democratic transition. Furthermore, India must also be critical of Myanmar's policies towards ethnic minorities, despite seeking engagement. Balancing between these seemingly opposing policies is crucial to how effective the Act East policy will be for Myanmar.

Notes

1 The country was renamed by the military junta from Burma to Myanmar in 1989. Both names have a political connotation in terms of sympathies towards the military regime. The use of 'Myanmar' in this paper does not carry any political implication, but is only following recognised change in the nation's name as per the United Nations yardstick. In certain instances, 'Burma' is used when referring to the colonial period.

2 Bertil Lintner, 'Charting the contours of India-Myanmar ties', *The Irrawaddy*, February 17, 2016.

3 The migrants issue began with the British pursuing the policy of divide and rule. Indians were given higher positions within the military, civil administration, etc., while the majority Bamar community in Burma was left out. This led to suspicion of the Indian diaspora within colonial Burma that culminated in the anti-Indian riots in 1930s. Please see Ghosh (2016).

4 Comprising eight articles, the Treaty called for enduring peace and friendship between the two neighbours. Article V specifically called for resolving issues arising from immigration and repatriation through diplomatic negotiations. For more information, see Ministry of External Affairs, *Treaty of Peace and Friendship*. New Delhi: Government of India, 1951. However, with the coming of the Ne Win military regime in 1962, the principles upheld by the treaty did not stand, given that the military government called for the expulsion of Indians from the state and nationalised assets held by Indians.

5 Interestingly, it has been noted that the Tatmadaw (meaning military), following visits to India and Pakistan, indicated that Indian military's strict adherence to colonial professionalism and tradition was to be avoided. Instead, the Tatmadaw favoured Pakistan's military model, which was not as Europeanised as India's.

6 The SLORC was renamed as the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) in 1997.

7 Myanmar faced sanctions imposed by the West. India also maintained its policy of calling for democracy in Myanmar, and initially distanced itself from the junta. However, the growing ties between Myanmar and China pushed India to renegotiate its policy towards Myanmar. See Ramya (2015).

8 See K. Natwar Singh, 'Burma's long night may finally be over', *India Today*, December 18, 2011.

9 See Jason Burke, 'Burma junta leader begins five-day tour of India', *The Guardian*, July 25, 2010.

10 ‘Myanmar is key pillar of India’s “Act East” Policy: PM Modi’, *The Hindustan Times*, July 14, 2017.

11 See Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, ‘India, Myanmar ink MoU on Rakhine’, *The Economic Times*, December 20, 2017.

12 See Asma Masood, ‘India-Myanmar relations: The superglue of skills-based education’, *Myanmar Business Today*, December 31, 2013.

13 Jonathan Tai, ‘Why India isn’t really “Acting East” in Myanmar’, *The Diplomat*, July 15, 2017.

14 ‘Tatmadaw to train in India for UN peacekeeping duties: Report’, *Frontier Myanmar*, November 19, 2017.

15 India reportedly conducted a surgical strike, meaning Indian defence forces crossed the international border entering Myanmar to carry out a counter-insurgency operation. The operation took place on 10 June 2015. The operation was conducted in response to an ambush by Naga militants on 4 June 2015, which killed 18 Indian soldiers in the Chandel area of Manipur.

16 ‘Myanmar says operation on militants was on Indian side of border’, *The Indian Express*, June 10, 2015.

17 Vijaita Singh, ‘Myanmar put off border pact with India’, *The Hindu*, March 4, 2018.

18 El El Toe Win, ‘Hluttaw approves India border deal’, *Myanmar Times*, January 20, 2014.

19 Bidhayak Das, ‘Dissent in the Naga Hills as India-Myanmar border follies linger’, *The Irrawaddy*, May 7, 2018.

20 See Bi Shihong, ‘India pursues Act East policy via Myanmar’, *Mizzima*, July 17, 2017.

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Part II
Northeast India in the Act East policy

6 Beyond `Frontier'

Cultural genealogy of India's Look East/Act East policy in Northeast India from a contemporary perspective *Nandini Bhattacharyya Panda* Northeast India had been the focal point of engagement of the postcolonial state since the early days. Since independence, India’s Northeastern ‘frontier’ has posed multiple challenges to the postcolonial state. The large stretch of international border enclosed by Bangladesh, Bhutan, China and Myanmar remains a pressing concern and a serious strategic challenge for the Government of India. The challenges have been aggravated by two significant factors: economic backwardness – ‘underdevelopment’ as denoted by the early postcolonial state –and ethnostate estrangement. At the same time, the entire region has immense potential to become the ‘powerhouse of Indian economy’ because of its rich natural, mineral and human resources, as well as commercial and diplomatic linkages with South and Southeast Asia. The fact, however, is that despite its immense potential, this region is still viewed as a backward region in terms of the socio-economic and human

development index, a source of threat against national security and integration. The Indian state has been trying to address these challenges through several experimentations in geopolitical structuring, economic policies, liberal gestures, friendly negotiations and hostile encounters. The Look East policy – later Act East policy – marks a significant endeavour to foster overall progress in the region, as well as to open India's commercial passage towards South and Southeast Asia via Northeast India. Concerns have been expressed, however, by the policymakers, scholars and the stakeholders over the limited success of the policy (so far) to yield both economic as well as diplomatic dividends, leading to nationwide debate and discussion to locate a more effective modus operandi to optimise the goal. This chapter, however, seeks to locate the trouble spots in history. It traces complex historical roots of the prolonged crisis in the passages of colonisation of Northeast India during the 19th and early 20th century. The scope of inquiry is vast. Therefore, it focuses on the history of border trade in Northeast India as an important index which may partly explain the complex economic ethnology of the region inhibiting the progress.

The North East Frontier Agency (NEFA), formed in 1954, may be considered aprelude to the formulation of the Look East policy promulgated around 1991, although NEFA was essentially an administrative structure. In the early days, Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India, appointed his team under his most trusted anthropologist-administrator, Verrier Elwin, to formulate and implement policies for the tribal citizens of the Northeast. Elwin wrote *A Philosophy for NEFA*, first published in 1957, to elucidate the blueprint of the government policy. The characterisation suggests that Nehru, Elwin and the team were keen to grapple with the land and people of Northeast India, with the aim of integration of the region with the rest of the country. Nehru was optimistic that Elwin's approach would be applied for tribal subjects in other parts of the country. The Indian state, however, tried to extend the mission and vision in the Northeast through formulation and implementation of the Look East policy in 1991. It was devised with extended diplomatic vision in Southeast Asia, combined with the objective of changing the political economy of the region.

The limited success of the policy both in terms of diplomatic and economic/commercial gains had been brought under the scrutiny of policymakers, scholars and stakeholders. The Act East policy is a modified version of Look East policy – keeping Myanmar in the centre stage of trade and commerce. Thus, border trade still remains the key vision that would ensure diplomatic growth and refurbishment of internal economy. The task, however, is still not easy. The people of Northeast India are generally sceptical about the policies of the central government in terms of benefit-loss paradigm, leaving the ethnostate relationship in a state of critical dilemma. This chapter will thus examine how the entire question of economic and diplomatic growth is critically entangled with cultural issues, and has its the origin in the history of colonisation of Northeast India.

The estrangement on all fronts between the people in the Northeast and the colonial state left an almost irreversibly adverse impact on the ethnostate relationship for centuries. The postcolonial Indian state inherited a troubled legacy from the colonial predecessors – tension, distrust and a displaced economy. Therefore, it is necessary to look into history in order to understand the roots of alienation in the colonial period towards ensuring better efficacy and outcome of the policies. The essay, therefore, embarks on a socio-historical analysis focusing on the stages of prosperity and decline of border trade and commerce with reference to time-knots. The

essay also links the intricate links of the commercial activities with the culturalisation of the economy. The paper is divided into two sections: trans-Himalayan border trade, which flourished over several centuries before the 19th century, and colonisation and culturalisation of Northeast India leading to destabilisation and displacement of the traditional economy, including trade and commerce.

Trans-Himalayan Border Trade: socio-historical review

Northeast `frontier' kingdoms in the larger political map in pre-colonial India

The history of the relationship between the ruling powers and the political authorities in Northeast India during the pre-colonial period is not adequately documented in the extant literature. Indeed, a few British administrators such as Robert Reid produced discourses on the culture and history of the people. Such accounts are, however, conquerors' appraisals of the colonised subjects. Interestingly, as it appears from the extant discourses, none of the colonial officers cherished any interest in the history of the indigenous subjects – the 'tribes' of Northeast India – other than ethnographic evaluation of their civilizational level compared to the superior masters. Almost all discursive texts produced by Robert Reid, for example, narrated the classical Hindu cultural and religious past of the prominent rulers in Assam and neighbouring areas. Those discourses barely reflect upon the traditional economy and trading and commercial patterns in the pre-colonial times, especially of the indigenous communities.

An interesting account is *A History of Mughal North-East Frontier Policy* (Bhattacharyya 1929), written by Sachindranath Bhattacharyya, a lecturer in the University of Dacca. The book, primarily based on the Persian sources, provides an elaborate narrative of the aggression and strategic designs of not only the Mughal emperors, but also the Islamic rulers of medieval Bengal, towards Northeast India. The book does not

necessarily reflect on the pattern of trade and commerce in the Northeast during the medieval period. The book provides a critical narrative of the autonomy of the people, despite the periodic invasions and strategic and commercial designs of the Islamic rulers to establish control over the rich and fertile land, and at the same time to extend their gaze towards Tibet. Bhattacharyya wrote the book on the implicit premise that the Islamic rulers could not encroach upon the traditional economic activities in the region, and the British ruler was successful in destabilising the autonomy of the people.

Bhattacharyya analysed the underlying strategic objective of the British to ensure complete hegemony. He stated that the British felt the imperative to establish strong control over the Northeast 'frontier' following the 'reflex influence of the prevalence of Bolshevik ideas and principles in China' (Bhattacharyya 1929, II). As he argued, the British apprehended that the influence would be 'subversive of peace, security and established the government in the land' (Bhattacharyya 1929). The 'Red Menace', as he stated, got 'prominence in the British and Anglo-Indian press'. The establishment of direct control over the hills had been implemented by the Government of India Act, 1919. Bhattacharyya's appraisal regarding the urgency of the British administration to extend hegemonic control over the region following the Bolshevik Revolution was right indeed. He situated the encounter of the Northeast region in the context of the Islamic world and in the context of the British policy. The British cast their gaze at the region long before 1929 – since the 18th century – with the motive to secure and extend their imperial boundaries and to establish control over natural resources.

Bhattacharyya narrated the relationship between the Northeast kingdoms and Islamic rulers of Bengal as well as the Mughal empire that indicates the political history of the region, especially the relationship between the regional kings with larger powers. It becomes evident from the narrative that the mainland rulers could not penetrate beyond the then Koch Bihar, Kamrup and Ahom kingdoms to the hills. Bhattacharyya also gathered from the Persian sources that the main objectives behind the aggression of Sultans of Bengal and the Mughal emperors were to extend their territories beyond Northeast towards Tibet, and to get access to the rich agricultural, water and mineral resources of the region (Bhattacharyya 1929, 53). Bhattacharyya further mentioned that Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khilji, who

defeated the Sena kings of Bengal in the 13th century, was ‘determined to invade Turkistan and Tibet’. Khilji’s plan was not successful, as he narrated that after initial success Khilji was resisted by ‘hardy mountaineers’. He had to retreat after a miserable defeat. It appears that the tradition of resistance of the hill communities against foreign invasion continued until the British period. Interestingly, Muhammad Bin Tughlaq, the celebrated and controversial ruler of North India in the 14th century, sent troops to conquer Kamrup, although it was a ‘tragic venture’ (Bhattacharyya 1929, 61). Bhattacharyya stated that Mughal emperor Jahangir also conquered Kamrup for a brief period as had been mentioned in Akbarnamah, Padishanamah and Fathiya-i-Ibriya (Bhattacharyya 1929, III). Bhattacharyya essentially pointed to two important facts: Northeast India attracted ruling powers in India over the ages due to its strategic importance, and despite invasions and occasional conquests, the powers outside Northeast India could not retain control over the territories.

Bhattacharyya provides some important information about trading activities in the region. He mentioned that Ralph Fitch, the English traveller, visited Koch Bihar and wrote about the flourishing silk and cotton industry in the region. Fitch also mentioned the trade relations of the entire region with neighbouring countries as far as China (Bhattacharyya 1929, 28). Based on the contemporary Persian sources, Bhattacharyya wrote about flourishing export-import trading activities throughout within and outside India. Guwahati was the ‘emporium of trade and industries’. The traders used to export gold, musk, aloe wood, pepper, spikenard, silk cloth, etc. The imported items were salt, salt petre, sulphur, etc. Interestingly, Ahom kings constructed goods roads to facilitate communication for inland trade, particularly by Pratap Singh (Bhattacharyya 1929, 29). Bhattacharyya cited Forster’s effervescent praise of the means of communication:

> The Romans have the reputation of being the masters of the art of road-making, but their efforts seemed small when compared with the network of enormous *bunds* (made of only mud) intersecting the country (Assam) in all directions.
>
> (Bhattacharyya 1929, 29)

Significantly, based on Fathiya-i-Ibriya, Bhattacharyya listed ‘industrial arts’ that included ‘silk weaving, velvet, *tatband*, other kinds of silk stuff,

very nice trays, throne, chairs of carved wood, fine lattice and relief work in wood'. Ahoms developed excellent skill in war-boats – 'massive kind' – built of Chambal wood. Other skills included gold gathering from the river Brahmaputra, casting of matchlocks, cannon and gunpowder. Based on the accounts of Fathiya, he mentioned that the people did not have to pay land tax. The land tax was substituted by 'enforced labour' (Bhattacharyya 1929). As for the mode of economic exchange, Fathiya mentioned conch shells (cowry), gold and silver coins. Bhattacharyya's narrative was limited to within Koch Bihar, Kamrup and Ahom kingdom (Assam). Evidently, the Persian authors did not acquire knowledge of the hills beyond present Assam. The following section looks into the vast network of the trans-Himalayan border trade in Northeast India.

Trans-Himalayan border trade in the pre-colonial period

Policymakers and researchers throughout the colonial and postcolonial period have been taking serious interest in exploring the traditional trade routes linking the Northeast region with neighbouring counties, going back throughout the history of the region. The studies have shown that the history of the human movement and trading activities across the border could be traced back to the remote past – over centuries and millennia. This region had a long history of trading and cultural linkage with the neighbouring regions in China, Tibet, Bhutan, Myanmar and beyond. Allchin, Bridget and Raymond (1968, 2) point out that this frontier region is often regarded as a colourful corridor between South and Southeast Asia because it has been receiving various races, languages, cultures and religions from Southeast Asia and China making the region culturally and racially diverse.

The cultural and economic linkages were facilitated by riverine and land routes. As for the riverine route, Manas Sarovar in Tibet is the source of river Brahmaputra. In Tibet, the name of the river is Tsangpo. It enters Arunachal Pradesh and then flows to Assam. All the principal cities in Assam, such as Guwahati, Tezpur developed on the banks of this great

river. The river flows to Bangladesh via Meghalaya, creating the border between Meghalaya and Bangladesh. The Brahmaputra is named Jamuna in Bangladesh. The journey is finished in the confluence of the Bay of Bengal. Thus, the Brahmaputra flowed across several regions and countries, linking both sides of borders.

In Arunachal Pradesh, the Lohit, Subansiri, Burhi Dihing, Noa Dihing and Tirap are navigable rivers and had been used by the people for communication and trade. The rivers Dhaleshwari, Sonai, Tuilianpui and Chimtuipui in Mizoram had also been used for navigation with small country boats. The colonial administrators tried to explore the traditional river routes with various objectives, especially transporting goods. During the period of British rule, the Brahmaputra and Barak-Surma rivers were used extensively for transport and trade between Northeast India and the port of Calcutta (now Calcutta). With the growth of the tea industry, these rivers became important carriers of trade. The English East India Company introduced the water route along the Brahmaputra from Calcutta to Dibrugarh in 1844, and steamships were introduced by the Joint Steamer Company in 1847. At about the same time, Silchar was linked with Calcutta along the Barak-Surma-Meghna navigation channel. Similarly, in Manipur, the Manipur river, along with its three main tributaries, the Iril, Imphal and Thoubal, had been used for transporting small quantities of merchandise by country boats in the pre-colonial times. The river routes thus provided important linkage for the border trade in the Northeastern region.

Presently, the term border trade is attributed to specific etymological connotations loaded by international financial and commercial regulations. Historically, the Northeast region provided important passages for cross-border trade via land route for several centuries. There was an ancient land route from Peshawar to Parvatipur (now in Bangladesh) passing through Vazirabad, Lahore, Jalandhar, Saharanpur, Lucknow, Tirhut and Katihar. It extended further to Assam from Parvatipur (Motichandra 1966, 127). It mostly passed keeping the Ganges to the South. A Southern route from Lahore to Bhagalpur, through Raivind, Firozepur, Bhatinda, Delhi, Allahabad, Varanasi and Patna, branched off to Gangasagar (Calcutta) from Patna. The route extended from Bhagalpur to Kajangal in Rajmahal and then to Calcutta. In fact, Gangasagar (Calcutta) route went to the Bay of Bengal port of Tamralipti, which has numerous mentions in the classical literature. Another route branched off from this Southern route to Kamarupa

and Yauan Chuang, a Chinese traveller, met Emperor Harsha Vardhana (6th/7th century) at Kajangal (Vasu 1933, 151), via this route. The route to Kamarupa extended up to Yunnan province of China (Motichandra 1966, 127). Kamarupa formed an important part of this trade route. An alternative trade route from India to China passed through Chumbi valley in Sikkim and Tibet. Reid Struan gathered from *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, the accounts of Chang Kien and Hieuen Tsang, that India (the ancient geographical expression of India) has a sustained economic and cultural link with China through Assam (earlier known as Kamarupa, and Pragjyotis even earlier) connected via land route. Some parts of the Northeast region, especially Assam and Manipur, were within the great Southern Silk Road (Reid 1994, 67).

Pangsau Pass in Patkai Hill range and other traditional routes

It is indicated in the extant literature that in the ancient past, Pangsau Pass offered a traversable pathway to the ancient Ava kingdom in present-day Myanmar and the passage to China. The Pass had the highest number of footfalls of travellers, traders and immigrants. The Pass originates in Mytikyana on the IrrawaddyRiver in Burma (Myanmar); stretching towards the north, it crosses Patkai by the Pangsau Pass in Arunachal Pradesh, and penetrates Assam. From Assam, the passage formed the pathway towards South China. H.K. Barpujari (1963, 64) mentioned that earliest reference to this Pass can be found in Hiuen Tsang's account, who visited King Bhaskarmarm's court in Kamarupa during the 7th century. Sir Edward Gait, in his *A History of Assam* (first published in 1906), mentioned that the Tai Ahoms from Eastern hill tracts of Upper Burma and Western Yunnan entered Assam through this Pass in 1228 A.D and established the Ahom kingdom (Gait 2008, 70). He narrated that early in the 13th century, 'a band of hardy hill men wandered into the eastern extremity of the Brahmaputra valley' (Gait 2008, 70). He described them as 'offshoots of great Tai or Shan race' who brought the entire Assam valley under their rule, occupied the Northern and Eastern hill tracts of Upper Burma and Western Yunnan.

The Burmese Army also used the same route during the early 19th century to occupy Manipur and Assam (Pemberton 1835, 44).

Referring to McCosh, Edward Gait described five passes as link roads in Northeast India: the Pangsau route, the pass of Dibong, the Mishmi route, the Phugan Pass to Manchee and China and the route via Manipur to river Irrawaddy (Gait 2008, 273). The sixth frequently used route had also been referred to in extant literature, called the Tibet-Assam route. This route linked Assam with Arunachal Pradesh via Tawang in Lohit Valley, Tibet via Tse-tang and Tso-a Dzong and finally connected China via Batang and Tachienlu. Barpujari, the noted historian of Assam, mentioned about this route as the principal trade link with Tibet and China (Barpujari 1963, 258). Gait also recorded in 1905 that 'numerous passes and ways, known as Duars, still exist between Assam and Tibet through Bhutan'. He mentioned that the route to Tibet 'ran across the Himalayan mountain parallel with the course of the Brahmaputra' (Gait 2008, 273). He again cited from *Tabaquat-i-Nasiri* to explain that there were 'thirty-five mountain passes through which horses were brought to Lakhnauti' (Gait 2008). Citing from Lieutenant Rutherford's report, he narrated the trading link between Lhasa merchants and Northeastern traders before the Burmese invasion in 1816 as quoted below:

> The commercial transaction between the two countries was carried on in the following manner. At a place called Chouna, two months' journey from Lhassa, on the confines of the two States, there was a mart established, on the Assam side there was a similar mart at Gegunshur, four miles distant from Chouna.
>
> (Gait 2008, 274)

According to this report, Lhasa merchants annually visited mainland China with their merchandise collected from Assam and Northeastern borders. The trading was conducted by about 20 persons, 'conveying bullion to the amount of one lakh rupees' (Gait 2008, 274). The Tibetan traders brought a considerable quantity of rock-salt in Assam market. The latter brought rice in large quantities, Assam silk, iron, lac, other skins, buffalo horns, pearls etc. Gait observed:

> That Lhassa was convenient and safe can be inferred from the small number of persons who composed the caravans, which even carried silver bullion to the amount of a lakh of rupees.

Gait (2008, 274)

Based on Rutherford's account, Gait (2008) further narrated an ancient trade route to Kabul along the Northeastern mountain ranges through Bhutan:

Tavernier mentions that in his time merchants travelled through Bhutan to Kabul to avoid paying the duty that was levied on merchandise passing into India via Gorakhpur. He described the journey as extending over desert and mountains covered with snow, tedious and troublesome as far as Kabul.

Gait (2008, 274)

Commodities and cultural exchange

Existing literature suggests that a major part of the trading activities along Northeast borders were carried out on an organised level. Markets and fairs were annually arranged in fixed spots, close to the borders on each side. Sadiya on the Assam border was one of the most prominent marketplaces for several centuries, in addition to Udalgiri, Daimara and Pashighat. Nain Singh, the Indian explorer of the mid-19th century, mentioned a vast stretch of the territory comprising the border trade routes from 'Ladakh to Kashgar, the Oxus, Kabul, Kathmandu, Lhasa, Kailash and Manasarowar, Tengri Nor, Mongolia, Lake Koko Nor, Amdo and Chamdo' (Verghese 2001, 41). He also mentioned Tsong Dzong on the Arunachal-Tibet border as an important trading centre. R.B. Pemberton (1835, 33) mentioned that the Manipuri traders maintained trading relations with Myanmar through Kubow valley till the advent of British rule in the region. Trading activities in all those areas were conducted through markets and huts along the border. In Manipur, Moreh is still a very significant zone, where trading activities are carried out through border huts.

The commercial exchanges in markets and huts thrived in the winter season. The traders from Tibet, Bhutan and Monpa areas in Arunachal Pradesh used to descend to the relatively plain areas in the market spot and spend the winter months. In all those areas, the residents could not engage in agricultural activities due to severe winter, especially from the middle of

December till the beginning of April. After the harvesting season, the traders brought their agricultural products and other commodities to the marketplaces and returned after the winter season. I would narrate the feedback from my Silk Route trip from Kalimpong to Lingthem (China border in Sikkim) in 2010 and interaction with the roadside villagers along the Silk Route via Pedong, Rishi Khola and Rhenock. For centuries, the Tibetan traders from other side used to come in groups consisting of women and children up to Kalimpong. In olden days, Lepcha habitations and settlements (as they were the original inhabitants of Sikkim and Darjeeling) grew up on both sides of the Silk Route. The Tibetan caravan used to take shelter and hospitality in the Lepcha villages on their way to Kalimpong. In turn, the villagers used to procure rock salt, dry meat, precious and semi-precious stones, wool etc. from the Tibetans. The Tibetan troupes used to stay a few months in Kalimpong and procure their necessary items. A large Tibetan settlement emerged in Kalimpong and its neighbourhood over a period of time, and those families still live there as they have for generations. I am personally acquainted with a Nepalese artisan family who manufacture finely crafted religious figures and ritualistic accessories of the Tibetan Buddhists. The figures and religious accessories are crafted in metal – mostly in brass and silver. Yogavir Sakya – a teacher, poet and head of this family – narrated that their forefathers migrated in Kalimpong 800 years ago and the family has been engaged in this occupation since that time. In the early days, the Tibetan traders used to procure those items on their annual visits. They still have a captive market in Tibet. Other sites also bear witness to a flourishing trade along the Indo-Tibet border. A few large buildings are still standing in Kalimpong town which were earlier used as warehouses and dyeing factories of Tibetan wool. Those historic buildings are in ruins, and some dilapidated structures are used as go-downs for wholesale agricultural products. Interestingly, some traders in Lingthem wholesale and retail China goods (garments, duvets, utensils, pickles, umbrellas etc) at cheap rates. The influence of Tibetan Buddhism is still very strong in Kalimpong and its neighbourhood. The Buddhist monasteries in the Kalimpong area organise religious ceremonies (for example *Chum* dances). Senior Lamas and Rimpoches from Tibet are regularly invited to grace the religious occasions and deliver religious teachings to the young Lamas.

In Assam, annual trade fairs were attended by buyers and sellers from different parts of Northeast and East India and beyond. The Tibetan merchants brought raw wool, woollen cloth, handwoven cloth, gold dust, coloured yarns, imitation blue turquoise necklaces, arm bands and charms, porcelain beads, coloured stones, salt, swords, musk, horses, Chinese silk, China ware, dry meat, etc. (Mackenzie 2012 15). The merchants from Bengal brought buffalo horns, silk, pearls, shells, copper, ghee, sugar, muslin, Benaras kinkhab, satin, iron, lac, coral, spices and assorted items. Assamese merchants traded with rice, spices, dye, fruit and raw silk, along with other items (Allen 1905, 112). In addition to those, the annual fairs traded with varied other items such as sulphur, salt-petre, spears, dried fish and vegetable poison, which were brought from different regions including interior areas from the Northeast region.

Bartering was the principal form of trading transactions, although money was not completely unknown to the traders. For example, Tibetan merchants brought silver bullion to purchase silk and other high-value commodities (Gait 2008, 274). However, Verrier Elwin (1999, 9) commented that ‘it is only recently that they have learnt the use of money’. This statement is partially correct as evident from other writings. Nevertheless, Elwin (1999, 9) admitted that ‘they have developed an elaborate system of barter and they took on most things in a hard-headed, almost commercial way’. It is rather intriguing why he used the word ‘almost commercial’ to describe the centuries-old trading network. In Tsong Dzong, tea, fine silk, leather boots and ponies were exchanged for salt wool and borax (Rawat 2002, 42). It had been reported by William Robinson (1975, 243) that the Bhutanese used to barter cloth, raw silk, yarn, rice, dried fish etc. for woollens, blankets, gold dust, musk, salt, Chinese silk and ponies from the Tibetan traders.

The Monpa community of Arunachal Pradesh is one of the most enterprising ethnic groups in Northeast hills, and should be specially mentioned in this context. They reared special breeds of ponies, horses and yaks to fetch huge sums of money from the Border Haats. The Monpas were frequent visitors to the markets in different locations: for example, Udalgiri, Rangapara, Lokra, Charduar and so on. They made long journeys to attend markets in Tsong Dzong, Merak and Sakten in Bhutan and other distant areas. They carried horses, ponies and yaks, along with chilli,

oranges, maize, vegetable dye, wooden bowls and other handicraft items from local producers.

The border markets were sites of cultural exchanges as well – the confluence of different languages, religious faiths and aesthetic practices. Inter and intra-border trading also affected human movements, migration and settlement patterns. This is evident in the striking similarities in the costumes and jewellery between Northeast and Southeast Asia. The people in Northeast India still use cowries and shells in their costumes, sourced from Bengal. Border markets were important sites for cross-breeding of languages. The traders were compelled to acquire working knowledge of the language of their trading partners. Also, the traders used to spend considerable time in the annual fairs, and interpersonal relationships also developed among them in the leisurely hours. Such interactions enhanced the vocabulary and skills of expression. With the traders, their knowledge about other languages also travelled back to their homeland. Even in the present time, the traders in border markets speak in a mixed language.

Religion and faith is yet another site where researchers may trace strong cultural interchange among the trading groups. Ethnic communities in Northeast India were traditionally nature worshippers/followers of the animistic cult. Christian missionaries entered the region with the introduction of the British rule. There was large-scale conversion, especially in Meghalaya, Nagaland, Mizoram and partly in Arunachal Pradesh. In Manipur, the influence of Christianity was confined to certain ethnic groups such as Kukis and Nagas. However, a section of people in Manipur embraced Brahminism and Vaishnavism before the colonial period – an outcome of their close connection with Hindu and Vaishnav communities, for example in Bengal. In the current perception among certain sections, Brahminical and Vaishnavite influence amounts to the cultural imperialism of the dominant religious groups. This is a different story. Interestingly, Buddhism made little impact in Manipur, despite its proximity to Myanmar. Tripura is known to be a land of diverse ethnic communities and races – Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist and indigenous origin. It was also the site of the confluence of different cultures. The people in Tripura interacted with ancient Sylhet, Samatata, Noakhali, Chittagong and other neighbouring states of Northeast India before the 12th century A.D.

Assam was the entrepot trading post and a passage to many destinations. It encountered several invasions over a period of time and became home to

immigrants. Assam became the habitat of many races and ethnic groups. A kind of homogeneous culture emerged under the dominant Hindu influence. The Koch and Ahom kings became practising Hindus. Saivaism, and more particularly Sakti cult, was professed by a large number of people. As is well known, Kamakhya is the famous religious site and a vigorous centre of Tantric cult (Gait 2008, 286). Vaishnava also found firm footing in Assam during the end of the 15th century through the patronage of ruling kings. Nevertheless, the Ahom kings retained their traditional cult of worshipping Lengdon, Jaisingh-pha, Khaukhan and others, and the rituals were performed by the traditional priests. It is also mentioned that Buddhism also flourished in Assam between the 8th and 10th centuries under the influence of Tibet (Singh 1966, 10–35).

Despite the inroads of Christianity, under the influence of Tibet, Burma and Bhutan, Buddhism had been very strong in Arunachal Pradesh. Tawang monastery, built in the 16th century, is an enthralling site of Buddhist pilgrimage. It maintains a close link with Drepung monastery in Lhasa, as N.K. Rustomji (1971, 35) narrated: ‘Drepung, with Ganden and Sera, constituted the trinity monasteries held in special reverence by the Tibetans and it was from Drepung that monastic officials were selected for appointment to high religious posts in the monastery of Tawang’. Since the 11th century, the Monpa community of Arunachal Pradesh has embraced Buddhism. There are many big and small monasteries in the Monpa settlements. Verrier Elwin offered a picturesque description during his visit to Kameng, a Monpa village: Quiet, gentle friendly, courteous, industrious, good to animals, good to children, you see in the Monpas the influence of the compassionate Lord Buddha on the ordinary man. They may have little theology: they have a great deal of religion. They are artistic too, even if their art is restricted by poverty to the love and decoration of flowers. But they nearly have all pretty things – a coloured sash, a decorated hat, a silver sword, and little cups exquisitely painted of wood or China.

Elwin (1999, 10) It is interesting that on several occasions Elwin expressed his amazement at the business acumen of the people in Northeast India. Presumably, he could not fully grapple with the nature and history of trade and commercial activities of the people in the past.

Colonisation and culturalisation: from sovereign communities to `Frontier Tribesmen'

Colonisation of Northeast India since the mid-19th century started a new epoch in the cultural and material life of the people of the region. It was then the entire region entered into the colonial mapping as a strategic ‘frontier’, a ‘savage’ space and a ‘wild tract’. The notion of Northeast India thus historically emerged in the global imagination primarily as a strategic notion and a cultural category – not a geographical location. In the colonial discourses, India’s Northeast border was projected as a ‘troubled’ region inhabited by half-naked ‘savage’ and head hunter tribes – a contraflow against the progress of civilisation. To a large extent, the colonial imagination/representation of India’s Northeast still endures in the popular imagination.

Alexander Mackenzie in *The North East Frontier of India* (1999, 6th ed., earlier published as *History of the Relations of the Government with the Hill Tribes of the North-East Frontier of Bengal* in 1884) contains a lengthy account on the imperial encounter between the British Government and the people of Northeast India. His book drew the land and people of the region within the strategic and cultural mapping. By using the term ‘frontier’, he directly situated the region with a strategic space in as early as 1884. Moreover, etymologically, ‘frontier’ denotes a margin, a periphery – not the mainstream or core. Therefore, the British, from the very beginning, situated the people of Northeast India in the ‘fringe’. For Mackenzie, ‘The Northeast frontier of Bengal is a term used sometimes to denote a boundary line and a tract’ (2012, 1). Mackenzie’s book is an imperialist’s account about the conquest of the ‘tract’, or in his word the ‘dominion’ of the British inhabited by ‘numerous savage races’ (Machenzie 2012, 1).

Mackenzie’s account of the land and people contains elaborate narrative on history, land and people. This book is essentially a justification for invasion and conquest of the land. He stated in the introductory chapter of the book:

> Before attempting to record the dealings of the government with the numerous savage races of this portion of dominions, it may be well very briefly to the events which led up to the occupation of Assam by the British and to give some general idea of the state of that province when we first entered it. This will tend to make clear the manner in which we were originally brought into

> contact with the hill tribes, and will serve to explain some facts and anomalies that might otherwise prove stumbling blocks to the students of frontier policy.
>
> (Mackenzie 1999, 1)

The note of justification behind the conquest of Northeast India is clearly evident in the above passage. The above passage, however, contains more than mere justification. It appears that Mackenzie ambitiously modelled his book as a handbook of ‘frontier’ policy to be followed by his colleagues and successors to deal with the ‘frontier’ people in another part of India and beyond. Thus, with these strokes of the pen, the independent communities of Northeast India transformed into ‘frontier tribesmen’.

Mackenzie wrote a lengthy narrative on the ‘despotism’ and worthlessness of the previous regime which led to ‘confusion and misery’ before the advent of the British (Mackenzie 1999, 3). He asserted that the British sought to introduce ‘enlightened policy’ to save those ‘savages’ from ‘barbarian cupidity’ and to treat them ‘fairly and liberally’, and finally should bring an end to the ‘indefinite nature of connexion subsisting between the Assam sovereigns and their savage neighbours’ (Mackenzie 1999, 8). Mackenzie explained that the British expedition and conquest was a necessity to introduce ‘definite policy on this frontier’ and save the savage subjects from barbarian practices (Mackenzie 1999, 7). As it is evident from subsequent history, the ‘enlightened’ and ‘definite’ policies of the British Raj ushered in the era of hostility and armed encounters between the ethnic groups and the colonial state.

The British rulers turned their eyes to the Northeast region mainly due to strategic considerations and territorial ambition beyond the borders. With their entry in the land since the early 19th century, the existing pattern of inter- and intrastate socio-economic relationships went into a new phase. The trans-Himalayan border trade was harshly affected due to the opening of sea routes with the advent of European traders and merchants. Northeast, as a landlocked region, had no natural access to seaports. The entrepot trade shifted from land to sea. The economic scenario turned worse with the imposition of geopolitical boundaries. The demarcation of the Northeast ‘Frontier’ had been instituted with formal regulations and military posting. The Indo-Burma border was drawn in 1826. Later, the India-Bhutan boundary was formed in 1865, followed by the India-Tibet border in 1914 and India-Pakistan in 1947. In the process, the primacy of sea routes and the

creation of strategic barriers destabilised the trans-Himalayan border trade in Northeast India.

The situation turned worse for the people with the enactment of ‘inner line regulation’ in 1873, which virtually isolated the Northeast region from the rest of India. After imposing a restriction on cross-border movements by the frontiers, the inner line isolated the people from the mainland. Eventually, trade and commerce languished, and the people lost their traditional occupation and livelihood. Elwin vindicated the ‘inner line’ with the following explanation: the inner line was enacted ‘not with the aim (as is often thought) of isolating hill people from the plains, but to bring ‘under more stringent control the commercial relations of British subjects with the frontier tribes’ (Elwin 1999, 66). He further elaborated that ‘inner line regulation’ formalised rules and regulations concerning ‘trade and possession of land beyond the line’ and also restricted the British subjects to pass beyond a certain point without a licence (Elwin 1999, 66). It is now history as to how the ‘inner line’ was contested and resisted by the local people. The ‘inner line’ was not effective in restricting the infiltration of ‘outsiders’ – mostly traders and businessmen. The entry of non-local traders and businessmen marginalised the local traders, which aroused deep resentment among the people.

There were other significant reasons for the decline of border trade and a complete breakdown of the indigenous economy on the whole. Land acquisition and forest laws enacted by the British rulers displaced the people from the source of their traditional livelihood. Possession over land and forest created deep resentment and hostility among the people, and that had been expressed time and again, mainly through armed encounters and military operations. The British rulers introduced privatisation of property rights in the name of ‘modernization’ and ‘development’ (Elwin 1999, 85). Displacement from land and forest, as well as the introduction of private property rights, led to the subversion of customary practices, further leading to the loss of cultural memory of the people. Elwin, however, could feel the evil impact of such measures on the people, as he stated: ‘land is a part of his spiritual as well as economic heritage’ (Elwin 1999, 62). He cited from a Census Officer’s report from Bombay (1931):

> The reactions of the Forest Laws on the hill and aboriginal tribes have been considerable. Previous to the creation of the Forest Department, hill tribes roamed the forest areas more or less at will and were generally the sole purveyors of forest produce.

(Elwin 1999, 67)

The British administrators, as well as the Christian missionaries, rationalised the policies in term of ‘civilising’ the ‘savage’. Elwin (1999, 48) termed it ‘The Policy of Detribalization’.

The post-colonial Indian state inherited Northeast India as a disturbed and unsettled political space with a displaced traditional economy. The ethnoscape was equally disturbing because an extraordinary number of people turned into militia (mostly from the young generation) who were ready to fight with the state. They resented their peripheral status but hardly wanted to integrate within the mainstream polity. In the present day, the imagination and attitude of the people are changing very slowly. However, the gestures and policies hardly changed the consciousness about ‘difference’, and it is mutual.

Jawaharlal Nehru endorsed the notions of ‘frontier’ more precisely – ‘North-East Frontier’ – while he wrote the foreword to the first edition of Elwin’s book, *The Philosophy for NEFA*. He also (subconsciously perhaps) superscribed the notion of difference, while he wrote in the foreword:

> I came in touch with the tribal people of Northeast Frontier of India, more specifically the Hill districts of Assam. My liking for them grew and with it came respect. I had no sensation of superiority over them. My ideas were not clear at all, but I felt that we should avoid two extreme courses: one was to treat them as anthropological specimen and the other was to allow them to be engulfed by the masses of Indian humanity.
>
> (Elwin 1957) [foreword to the First Edition]

The notion of otherness is evident in Nehru’s statement, although he tried to be cautious in his statement to maintain neutrality. Nehru further pointed out:

> We should not over-administer these areas or overwhelm them with a multiplicity of schemes. We should rather work through, and not in rivalry to, their own social and cultural institutions.
>
> (Elwin 1957) [foreword to the Second Edition]

This is not a space to elaborate on the prudence and efficacy of Jawaharlal Nehru’s policy in the Northeast Frontier of India. It will be briefly stated

that Elwin made marked distinctions between ‘civilised’ and ‘primitive’, ‘cultured’ and ‘barbaric’, ‘enlightened’ and ‘ignorant’. A close reading of *A Philosophy for NEFA* offers poignant clues to Elwin’s mission to ‘civilize the savage’. This book is full of subjective assessment about the ‘tribes’ of the region – their characteristic traits, ethnic dispositions and level of culture. With poetic fervour, Elwin (1957, 41–48) examined whether the term ‘noble savage’ may be used in defining the ‘tribes’ of Northeast India.

Finally, it is submitted that the prospect of success of the strategic and economic policies such as Look East and now Act East policy would largely depend on the human factor. The people of Northeast India resent militarisation of the region. Similarly, the common people feel aggrieved about the culture of violence that has prevailed in the region over the centuries. A strong literary tradition has emerged in the region which poignantly articulates the contesting trends between development and environment, and those essentially intersect each other. The ecopoetic/ecocritic genre of literature shows anxiety about the loss of folkloric tradition and changing the landscape with diminishing natural resources. At the same time, they cast their gaze at ‘development’ with the hope that it would not alter the surroundings in an undesirable manner. The British rulers adopted a number of policies and strategies to infiltrate into the region along with ‘development’ packages such as education, health, industry and commerce. The post-colonial state followed the steps of the earlier regime in a similar line of development and progress with periodic modifications and a changing vision, but without substantial revision of the basic approach towards the land and the people. There is now the imperative and urge to understand the ‘needs and ‘priorities’ of Northeast India in the light of history. Major or minor movements in the volume of trade and commerce would not ensure the desirable and sustained growth either for the state or the region. India’s most troubled legacy is to perceive and diagnose the erring histories which created the complexities. It would provide vital clues to the successful implementation of diplomatic and economic devices.

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7 Contextualising India's Act East policy in the Northeast region

Jiten Yumnam India’s new Act East policy, unveiled during the 25th Summit of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations in Naypyidaw, Myanmar in November 2014, signalled a change of vision and strategies from its previous Look East policy, which was aimed at improving India’s economic and strategic ties with Southeast Asia. The policy is a clear manifestation of the aggressive pursuance of neoliberal policies across India’s Northeast. The intent, decision-making processes and implications of the policy led to much concern across the region. The massive infrastructure push, which is financed by the international financial institutions in implementing the policy and subsequent targeting of peoples’ land and natural resources, undermined the indigenous peoples’ rights and environmental sustainability. Militarism and the undemocratic nature of the state and corporate bodies have intensified the targeting of peoples’ land and resources. A clear rethinking of the relevance and implications of the Act East policy on the indigenous peoples of India’s Northeast is highly critical.

From `Look' to `Act' East

India’s Northeast (Northeast India), juxtaposed in a very strategic geographic location between South Asia, Southeast Asia, East Asia and also in proximity to the Bay of Bengal, today represents a focus of overlapping policies for economic and political domination by developed and emerging economies. The region comprising the Indian states of Manipur, Meghalaya, Tripura, Assam, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram and Sikkim has been subjected to India’s Act East policy, Japan’s Free and Open Asia Pacific Strategy and heavily influenced by China’s One Belt One Road (OBOR), and other Asia-Pacific strategies of countries like the US.

Northeast India is primarily a focus of the Act East policy, erstwhile referred to as the Look East policy. India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi unveiled the Act East policy during the 25th Summit of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in Naypyidaw, Myanmar in 2014, signalling a change of vision and strategies from the earlier Look East policy externally. The Act East policy has been projected as an action-oriented policy towards ASEAN and the Indo-Pacific region at large, as compared to the Look East policy, first formulated in 1991. The term 'Act East' was considered derived from the statement of the then-US Secretary of State, Ms Hillary Clinton, during her India visit in 2011 where she suggested India to proactively engage and act East rather than just looking East.[1]

The Act East policy aimed to further consolidate and advance India's position as a regional power in the Indo-Pacific region and to respond strategically to the rapid expansion of China strategically across Asia, which India considers as a significant threat and challenges to its economic and political ambitions and presence in Asia. Through the Act East policy, India intends to reap the benefits of potential offered by the economic integration of ASEAN, and to overcome the country's security issues such as ongoing insurgency movements in India's Northeast. Such economic and political circumstances externally and internally culminated in the formulation of the Look East policy. Under the Act East policy, India's Northeast, which shares historical and traditional bonds with the ASEAN region, is perceived as the springboard for India's increasing engagements with Southeast Asia.[2]

The Act East policy has already gone through two phases. The first phase (1991–2002) emphasised renewing political and economic relations with ASEAN. During the second phase, after 2003, the policy sought to significantly expand the focus and geographical coverage beyond ASEAN countries to include countries in the East Asia and Pacific regions, especially China, Japan, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand, etc., and prioritising economic and security issues, such as efforts to protect the sea lanes and counter-terrorism activities (Haokip 2014). Under the policy, India made substantial achievements in building relationships with ASEAN. The first India-ASEAN Business Summit was held in New Delhi in 2002. India signed ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia in 2003. India also became a member of Asia-Pacific Economic

Cooperation. At the 16th India-ASEAN summit in Singapore in November 2018, India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi focused on strengthening maritime cooperation and trade relations with ASEAN, and held bilateral meetings with the premiers of Singapore, Australia and Thailand to discuss ways to strengthen ties in the areas of trade, defence and security.[3]

Act East policy: ASEAN and beyond

Promoting connectivity with ASEAN countries such as Myanmar and Thailand remains a key focus under the Act East policy. India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi reaffirmed the country's commitment to deepening physical connectivity with ASEAN in his meeting with ASEAN leaders in Myanmar in 2014, and announced the creation of a 'special purpose vehicle' for connectivity projects. India further announced $1 billion to promote connectivity at the India-ASEAN Summit in Kuala Lumpur in 2015. The Act East policy also focused on connecting India's Northeast by land and air to ASEAN and South Asian countries, and by sea to the Bay of Bengal and adjoining waters.

India is coordinating with Myanmar and Thailand to complete the 1,400-km long trilateral highway from Moreh (Northeast India) to Mae Sot (Western Thailand), passing through Myanmar to boost connectivity, trade, business, health, education and tourism ties among the three countries. The Border Roads Organisation of India has upgraded the Tamu-Kalewa-Kalemyo section of the highway in Myanmar. The National Highway Authority of India signed an agreement with Punj Lloyd Ltd, in a joint venture with Varaha Infra Ltd, in April 2018 for upgrading of the Yagyi-Kalewa section in Myanmar to a two-lane road with an earthen shoulder. The project is funded by India.[4] India has been trying to extend the trilateral highway to Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam, which is part of its efforts to counter China's OBOR project. India is already working with Myanmar in the areas of border area development, capacity building, infrastructure development, connectivity projects and institutional development. India, Myanmar and Thailand have been negotiating the Trilateral Motor Vehicles Agreement. India is also funding the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit

Transport Project in Myanmar to complement the trilateral highway, to connect ASEAN through sea route from Calcutta and also the Northeast region to the Bay of Bengal through Mizoram. Under the Kaladan project, Mizoram would be connected with Myanmar's port of Sittwe through the Kaladan River. The project intends to connect landlocked Northeastern states to have access to the Bay of Bengal (Panda 2017). India has also been trying to reopen the Stilwell Road connecting to Kunming in China.

India's Act East policy also involves targeting the land and natural resources of ASEAN countries for economic gains for its corporate bodies, both public and private. India intensified its efforts to increase its economic foothold in markets of ASEAN countries and beyond since adoption of the Act East strategy. India endeavoured to support the construction of Thamanthi hydropower project (1200 MW) and Shwezaye hydropower project (880 MW) over the Chindwin River (Myanmar), though both have faced objections by the local people.[5] Indian public sector oil and gas companies have been investing in Myanmar's hydrocarbon sector including exploration, refinery upgradation, fuel retailing and city gas distribution. The Oil and Natural Gas Corporation and GAIL (India) Ltd are investing in producing gas blocks in Myanmar.[6] India also collaborates with Vietnam for oil and gas exploration in the controversial South China Sea. Indeed, Vietnam granted Indian oil firm ONGC Videsh Limited a two-year extension to explore oil Block 128 in the South China Sea.[7] India set up the Project Development Fund to help Indian business explore economic opportunities in Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam for promoting markets. India extended a line of credit worth $36.92 million to finance a water resources development project in Cambodia.[8]

In addition to connectivity projects, fostering border trade with neighbouring countries forms a key component of the Act East policy. The Land Port Authority of India has established two Integrated Check Points at Moreh in Manipur and Agartala in Tripura, and Land Customs Station at Dawki in Meghalaya for expansion of trade with Myanmar and Bangladesh. Under the North-East Business Processing Outsourcing scheme, the business processing outsourcing centres have already started working in Guwahati, Jorhat, Kohima and Imphal.[9] There are plans to promote air connectivity between major cities of the Northeast region, such as Guwahati, Imphal and Agartala, to cities in Southeast Asia.

The overt focus on regional connectivity, cross-border trade and commerce, and to unlock the Northeast region for full-fledged implementation of the Act East policy, requires setting up massive infrastructure such as roads, railways, waterways, high voltage transmission lines, exploration of oil and gas, etc. India has signed multiple financing agreements with bilateral and multilateral institutions like the World Bank, Asian Development Bank, Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) and Germany's KFW to finance these plans. The implementation of the policy is also associated with an aggressive focus on tapping the mineral and other natural resources of the region, with multinational companies from India and other countries signing agreements with state and central governments and commencing surveys and exploration work. The focus on these natural resources is in the pretext of fostering economic development in the region. Many of the infrastructure establishments are established to facilitate such plans.

India maintains that security and economic development of its Northeast region is critical for the success of the Act East policy. India's engagement with ASEAN under the policy has been subjective to its security considerations and as such, the cooperation with ASEAN encompasses security, counter-terrorism and defence collaboration. The effort to maintain peace and security in the Northeast for successful implementation of Look East policy led to the increased military and security cooperation with Thailand, Myanmar, Bhutan and Bangladesh to subdue insurgency and self-determination movements in the region. The military cooperation is also intended to deter Chinese influence in India's Northeast.

Implications of the Act East policy in India's Northeast

India stressed that the Act East policy serves two purposes for the country: stronger trade and business ties with ASEAN countries, and development opportunities for the Northeast region. The Northeast has the uniqueness of being the only region having overland links with the ASEAN countries. Besides, it also enjoys close historical and cultural linkages which will help

in strengthening ties with Southeast Asia. India stressed that the success of the policy will be determined by its efforts and contribution to security and economic development of the region while propounding that development is an anecdote to persistent insurgency or self-determination movements in the Northeast region.

***An overt focus on connectivity*:** Considering its proximity to the ASEAN countries, the policy focused on opening Northeast India for trading and commerce with Southeast Asia to foster development in the region. Greater connectivity and economic integration of Northeast India with ASEAN is projected as a key focus area for growth and development of the region. The focus on connectivity is a continuation from the pursuance of the Look East policy that perceives the region as the gateway to connect with ASEAN countries, hence the overwhelming initiatives for roads and railways in the last few decades, with the active involvement of international financial institutions (Bhattacharjee 2018). As part of the agreement of Japan, the US and India in April 2018 to work together on infrastructure projects in the Indo-Pacific region to counter growing investment by China,[10] India's Northeast, Myanmar, Bangladesh and Nepal have been subjected to massive infrastructure investment from Japan and US through bilateral and multilateral financial institutions, primarily the Asian Development Bank and the World Bank.

Both Look East and Act East have identified essential needs, both to open up to ASEAN countries and to boost connectivity with and economic growth in Northeast India. India projects that to foster and sustain meaningful connectivity with ASEAN, it is essential to focus on development and connectivity in its Northeast region, with new road and rail links, opening up multi-modal transport including river navigation, and setting up industrial corridors with emphasis on agriculture, horticulture, handlooms, handicrafts and processed food.

A massive network of roads, railways and waterways are currently being pursued across the region with financing by major international financial institutions like the ADB and World Bank. Selected connectivity projects initiated in the Northeast region under the Act East policy include railway projects to connect all capital cities of the region by 2020, a 4,000-km-long road to connect the states in the region, rail connectivity with Myanmar and Bangladesh and to develop 20 ports townships along the Brahmaputra and Barak river systems.

The ongoing construction of the Trans-Asian railway is marred with massive destruction of forest and land. Apart from the unaccountability of railway authorities, multiple companies are involved in the construction. These infrastructures are also pushed to facilitate the expropriation of land and resources. Concerns abound about the lack of democratic decision-making, social and environmental devastations and lack of accountability of corporate bodies involved in such an infrastructure push. Sea connectivity from India to ASEAN is also envisaged through the Kaladan project, which will link Calcutta to Sittwe port in Myanmar, and also Mizoram by river and land route. As part of fostering trading, a series of land ports and Integrated Check Points have been established. The international entry-exit checkpoints on the Tamu-Moreh border between Manipur and Saga-ing division, and the Rihkhawdar-Zokhawthar border between Mizoram and Chin state, were officially opened simultaneously in August 2018.

***Act East policy targeting natural resources*:** The pursuance of the policy across Northeast India is associated with the signing of a series of Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) targeting the land and natural resources of the region. ASEAN countries have also been eying the region to boost trade and commerce. Several Ambassadors of ASEAN countries to India attended the North East Development Summit held in Imphal in 2017, in which the Manipur government signed about 39 MoUs with different firms, primarily in trade, tourism, healthcare, infrastructure, skill development, education and agriculture.[11] Indeed, several MoUs for dam building, oil exploration, road building, railways, climate change financing, etc. have already been signed, and further MoUs are expected as well. Manipur's and the Northeast region's oil, gas, chromium, limestone, forest and rivers will be opened up further for expropriation by corporate bodies with the signing of these MoUs.

South Korea-based Cona International Ltd, a consortium of investors, has signed two agreements with the Nagaland government for investing in a Special Economic Zone and industrial growth centre. Another South Korean company, the Korea Gas Corp, is preparing to ink an agreement with Nagaland for possible investment in limestone, and also develop a liquefied natural gas export unit in the state as a transit point for export to ASEAN countries.[12] The Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas, Government of India, granted license to a Dutch company, the Jubiliant Oil and Gas Private Limited, in the year 2010, to commence oil exploration and

drilling works in two oil blocks in Churachandpur, Jiribam and Tamenglong districts of Manipur. There has been an aggressive process to oil exploration and drilling by multinational corporations like Oil India Limited, Jubilant Oil and Gas Private Limited, Canaro Oil, etc. Similarly, several MoUs have been signed targeting the mineral resources of the region.

***Increased IFI financing*:** In line with India's extensive borrowing from inter national financial institutions (IFIs) for its major infrastructure projects across the country, this financing gap for the policy is envisaged for further financings by the IFIs, primarily as loans. There have been several agreements with multilateral IFIs and developed countries to finance the implementation of various projects. Japan is considered pivotal to realise India's Act East Policy. India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi even described Japan as the cornerstone of the Act East policy in the India-Japan bilateral summit during 28–29 October 2018 in Tokyo, and the two countries agreed to work together for the development of the Indo-Pacific region. The Northeast has emerged as a key link in this chain.[13]

India and Japan agreed to establish the India-Japan Act East Forum in 2017. The forum is expected 'to provide a platform for India-Japan collaboration under the rubric of India's Act East Policy and Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy. The Forum will identify specific projects for economic modernization of Northeast India'(Ministry of External Affairs 2017). At the same time, the India-Japan Coordination Forum for Development of North East was also launched in the same year to 'further expand cooperation between Japan and India' (Embassy of Japan in India 2017) and to execute infrastructure building projects.[14]

The IFIs are funding large infrastructure projects as part of the connectivity projects for cross-border trade and commerce with the neighbouring countries. The ADB is funding a $425-million multi-tranche SASEC Road Connectivity Investment Program for improving 'road connectivity and efficiency of the international trade corridor' in North Bengal area of West Bengal and Northeast region (ADB, Project Number 47341–001). The World Bank had cleared a $107 million credit for the Mizoram State Roads II – Regional Transport Connectivity Project in the year 2014, to improve the links within India's Northeast, primarily Mizoram with Bangladesh and neighbouring countries, i.e. Myanmar, Bhutan and Nepal (World Bank 2014). Similarly, the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) sanctioned $610 million for Phase I of the

North East Road Network Connectivity Improvement Project in April 2017 to improve the conditions of National Highway 54 and 51 in Mizoram and Meghalaya. The improvement of National Highway 54 is expected to enhance connectivity of the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transport Corridor, which seeks to link the Northeast region with the rest of India via Myanmar, by roads, inland water transport, etc. (JICA 2018). The IFIs' financing has been pursued with a clear lack of provision of information and failure to consider the longer-term social, environmental, cultural and other intergenerational implications.

The IFIs' financings are a significant process of unlocking Northeast India, implying that the region has long been kept locked politically and economically for long by the government with implying the security considerations for development processes adopted in the region. The unlocking would mean not only opening up its borders, but also its land and natural resources, for exploitation and investment. Indeed, the Asian Development Bank maintained that the region has unexploited natural resources, and stressed that the creation of its action plan would enhance the conditions for private sector-led growth and increased participation in global and regional markets (Asian Development Bank 2004).

The extensive road building pursued across the region is clearly to serve the economic and military purposes of the state. Road building under various connectivity projects is all envisaged to support the construction of more than 200 mega-dams planned across the Brahmaputra-Barak river systems, to facilitate the exploration and drilling of oil and gas and to mine minerals from across the region. The World Bank's approval of USD $470 million loans in 2016 to support six states in the region (Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura) to augment their 400 KV high-voltage transmission and distribution networks will also facilitate the exploitation of energy potentials of rivers in the region by the construction of mega-dams (World Bank 2016). The high-voltage transmission lines are also intended to export the surplus power generated in the Northeast to neighbouring countries – Myanmar, Nepal, Thailand, etc. The extensive financing of roads by bilateral and multilateral development finance institutions are clearly to pursue the corporate interest towards expropriating the land of the indigenous people. The Pare Hydroelectric Project with KfW financing in Arunachal Pradesh and the proposed 66 MW

Loktak Downstream Project envisaged for JICA financing in Manipur are opposed by affected communities.

Act East policy and deregulation of policies: The introduction of Act East policy is characterised by the formulation of new policies and deregulation of policies towards a more business-friendly environment. Dilutions of policies are significant features towards intensification of liberalisation and privatisation of development processes. Policies on the privatisation of services and the change of existing laws to foster greater privatisation of services led to the enactment of the public-private partnership. A key intention of the introduction of the Finance Act 2017 is to curb the power of the National Green Tribunal, established to monitor the violation of 'Forest Clearance' and 'Environment Clearances' in development projects.[15] The Hydrocarbon Vision 2030 for Northeast India, the Manipur Hydro Power Policy 2012 and the New Land Use Policy 2014 are some of the policies aimed to advance neoliberal policies and corporatisation of development in Manipur and across Northeast India. In particular, the Hydrocarbon Vision 2030 for Northeast India, formulated in early 2016, outlined detailed plans to explore and drill oil and gas across the region and to set up massive infrastructure plans, especially roads, railways and oil pipelines, and to further establish and improve oil processing facilities, such as at Numaligarh Refinery (Assam) to market oil-related products to countries in both South and Southeast Asia. There are ongoing efforts and processes to weaken the Forest Rights Act of 2006 and the Land Acquisition Act of 2013, which will further lead to the alienation of land and forest for the indigenous communities who are depending on their land for survival and livelihood.[16] The Draft Forest Rights Policy 2018 has been introduced, which many fear will further subsume community rights over their forest, while also negating the provisions and advances in the Forest Rights Act 2006 on the involvement of traditional institutions. The introduction of new policies and the dilution of existing environmental policies are an essential feature of the pursuance of Act East policy in the Northeast.

***Enhanced security cooperation in Act East policy*:** The security dimension of the Act East policy, both to subdue insurgency in Northeast India and also to counter Chinese economic domination and political influence in South Asia and Southeast Asia, ushered in an additional source of tension and conflict in the region. Development cooperation, including

military cooperation, has become an emerging phenomenon to counter Chinese influence in both South and Southeast Asia. India is a partner of the quadrilateral alliance with Japan, Australia and the US to counter China. India and Japan agreed to step up defence cooperation.[17] India has been involved in providing training to military personnel of Myanmar and engaged in military cooperation to crackdown on insurgent groups, believed to operate in Myanmar and further to combat the menace of drug trafficking prevalent in the Northeastern states bordering Myanmar.

The enhanced military cooperation is also in the context of stated objectives of safeguarding the economic cooperation between India, Japan, US, Australia and other allied powers, and also to counter the Chinese influence in both South and South East Asia, with the Northeast in the midst. The US, India and Japan conducted a trilateral 'Malabar' naval exercise in the Bay of Bengal in 2017 to demonstrate increased defence cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region, even deploying front-line warships, submarines and aircraft as part of the exercise.[18] The Act East policy has widened the canvas by putting Australia at the centre of India's eastern strategy and the South Pacific back on India's political radar. By aligning India's policy with the US through the Joint Strategic Vision for Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean region, India strives to expand and strengthen its geo-strategic space to counter China's growing assertiveness in the Asia-Pacific region. The military cooperation with Japan, the US, Australia, Bhutan, Myanmar, etc. for economic and security reasons and to counter China evokes much insecurity across Northeast India.

Development cooperation for infrastructure financing, primarily road projects in the region as part of the implementation of the Act East policy, conjures another dimension of conflict. The potential for conflict is highly visible when the Japanese effort to fund infrastructure projects, primarily road projects in Arunachal Pradesh, has been met with stern objection from China, which claimed Arunachal Pradesh as part of South Tibet. India and China have been in conflict over the control of Arunachal Pradesh. Indeed, a war between India and China had broken out in 1962 over China's claim of Arunachal Pradesh. In 2009, China protested the inclusion of a water management project in Arunachal Pradesh as part of a $2.9 billion loan that the Asian Development Bank had promised India.[19] China has denounced the India-Japan Act East Forum.[20] The military standoff between the Indian

and Chinese military in June 2017, after India objected the road building by China in Doklam, which Bhutan claimed as their territories, led to much tension across India's Northeast.

***Act East Policy and militarisation*:** The increased infusion of financial capital has additionally complicated the armed conflict situations pervading India's Northeast over movements for self-determination with myriad and contesting demands. The advancement of the corporatisation process in negating communities' rights, and unaccountable forms of the development process, led to much resentment of the local communities. The Indian state's recourse is often militaristic in nature. The militarisation process is further exacerbated by the aggressive push for large infrastructure projects, extractive industries (mining, oil exploration, etc.), and key infrastructures financed with development cooperation from multilateral and bilateral financial institutions. The Indian armed forces deployed for counter-insurgency operations in the region are also involved in protecting hydroelectric projects, mining, oil drilling sites and other infrastructure projects. The ongoing pursuance of the Trans Asian Railway led to the surge of deployment of security forces and military personnel in Tamenglong and Noney districts of Manipur to protect the machinery and the labour involved in the project.

The pattern of an aggressive push for unsustainable development, such as large infrastructure, mining, dam building, oil and gas exploring that bulldoze peoples' land and resources and that negate community rights, the brute undemocratic nature and also the reliance on state security apparatus simply imply the militaristic nature of development processes. The Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958 (AFSPA), an Act introduced to counter the armed liberation movements, derogated fundamental rights and legitimised intense militarisation in the region. The militarisation has led to extra-judicial executions, arbitrary killings, enforced disappearances, sexual harassment, etc. with complete impunity conferred to the armed forces personnel perpetuating such violations under the Act. The Supreme Court of India is examining a Public Interest Litigation seeking a probe in the 1,528 cases of extra-judicial executions in Manipur from 2000 to 2012 committed by the security forces.[21]

The militaristic nature of the development process has further incited and provoked additional sources and dimensions of conflict between the community and the state, with the corporate bodies and the communities.

The ultimate response to this manifestation of conflict is again militaristic, rather than addressing the underlying cause of the lack of democracy and respecting the self-determined right to development etc. The implications of militaristic and undemocratic forms of development will adversely impact the social life, environment, culture and polity of indigenous peoples.

***Impacts of privatisation*:** A significant trend of the pursuance of the Act East policy in India's Northeast is the strong emphasis on the intensification of trade and private sector participation, with due facilitation of the IFIs. IFIs have been forcibly propagating and facilitating the privatisation of services such as the water and power sectors. All development strategies of IFIs in their technical assistance for projects in Manipur and across the region prescribe private sector development as the engine of growth in the region. The strategy is also geared towards taking appropriate steps to facilitate free and unhindered trade and increase opportunities for private sector participation.

The ADB's Private Sector Development Strategy for the region emphasised the private sector in the development of all sectors and to mitigate private sector risks. The ADB also considers that its trade and investment creation initiative for the region is necessary to improve the market environment for trade and investment in the region and in creating a favourable environment for potential private sector investments to enable the region to participate in global and regional markets. The pursuance of the Act East policy also sees the central government of India and regional governments formulating laws to create an enabling environment for the private sector role. The Hydrocarbon Vision 2030 for the North East Region, the New Land Use Policy, the Manipur Climate Change Action Plan 2010, the Manipur State Sustainable Development Goals 2032, the Tourism Policy 2010, the Manipur Hydropower Policy 2012, etc. all propagate private sector roles in implementing the policies. Further, the amendment to the Mining Act 2015, etc. and also the recently introduced Draft Forest Policy 2018 will facilitate the privatisation of development. The 2015 amendment of the Mining Act 1957 will accord more emphasis to the rights of the central government on major minerals, while also conferring greater rights and roles to private mining companies and conferment of more legal impunity (Karat 2015).

The operation of the French Cement Multinational Company, Lafarge, supported by the ADB and the International Finance Corporation for a

limestone mining operation in Meghalaya, has led to the destruction of forest and violations of customary laws and land ownership. Lafarge failed to take free, prior and informed consent of the communities affected by its mining. The Lafarge mining involves violation of the Forest Conservation Act 1980 and the Forest Rights Act 2006.[22] The World Bank-financed Mizoram State Road project, implemented by corporate bodies like RBM Tantia of Malaysia, Baghareetha Private Limited, Termat Engineering and Infrastructure Private Limited has been mired with controversies on rehabilitation of communities affected by the road project.

The awarding of oil blocks in Manipur and other parts of the region to Dutch-based Jubilant Energy has been concealed from the communities. The effort to exploit land and resources, such as the oil exploration works, mining and mega-infrastructure works have been met with wide opposition for blatant violation of social and environmental norms.[23] The JICA, ADB and World Bank currently facilitate the privatisation of water supply services in Imphal, Guwahati, Shillong, etc. Even private corporate bodies are involved in dam building processes. For instance, Jindal Power Limited has signed an agreement with the Government of Arunachal Pradesh to construct the 3097 MW Hydropower project in Etalin, the 1800 MW power plant in Kamala and another 680 MW Hydropower plant in Attunli. The JICA is expected to fund the 66 MW Loktak Downstream dam in Manipur. The subsequent investments of corporate bodies in the extensive road building, high-voltage transmission and distribution lines, the Trans Asian Railways etc. will further facilitate the expropriation of land and resources. The corporate bodies, in their scramble for super-profit, have caused unrestrained environmental destruction, displacement, divide and rule among communities and human rights violations.

Environment impact: Environmental impact is a significant and growing concern. The limestone mining in Meghalaya by Lafarge has been accused of destroying eco-sensitive areas for mining and mortgaging tribal land to foreign banks. One of the main complaints was the use of heavy explosive materials in blasting hills for limestone. Due to blasting, cracks had appeared in the earth, causing a drinking water shortage due to drying up of spring water in the Shella region of Meghalaya.[24] Likewise, private companies involved in railway works in Tamenglong and Imphal West districts of Manipur have blatantly disregarded the devastating impact the project inflicted on the environment. The impacts included the destruction

of forest areas and the discharging of contaminated and chemical-laden liquid waste in Ejei, Barak and Irang rivers. This railway work also violated the Forest Rights Act, 2006.

Non-recognition of indigenous people's rights: A significant challenge in road projects financed by IFIs to promote connectivity-related infrastructure projects has been a lack of recognition of indigenous peoples' patterns of land ownership. There has been a failure to conduct detailed impact assessments with the rightful participation of these communities. These assessments are extremely important, as they help to determine the best possible measures for affected peoples' rehabilitation and resettlement. A clear illustration of these issues is seen in both the Heirok to Khudengthabi road project and the Imphal to Moreh road (both in Manipur), financed by the ADB. In both cases, the impact on the livelihood of indigenous communities due to road cutting in hill and forest areas, failure to rightfully involve the affected communities in conducting an impact assessment and failure to adopt a clear rehabilitation and resettlement acceptable to them is a significant problem of these projects. The ongoing oil and gas exploration and drilling in Manipur by Jubilant Energy Private Limited and Oil India Limited have failed to take the consent of local communities. Residents of Kambiron, Sibilong and Oinamlong villages, as well as others from Tamenglong district, rejected the efforts of Asian Oilfield to seek 'No Objection Certificates' for surveys without providing information.

***Growing attacks on human rights defenders*:** Community leaders who are striving for the defence of land and natural resources are critical of the current exploitative and unsustainable development models, such as dam building, oil exploration, mining, etc., and are often branded as anti-development, antinational, insurgents, etc., and subjected to human rights violations. Community leaders asserting land rights and democratic development processes are considered an impediment to India's reach and influence through the Act East policy. The suppression and muffling of all voices critical of the government's unsustainable, exploitative development processes become an increasing pattern. Attempts to impose restrictions on NGOs from engaging in any political activity detrimental to the state's functioning through amendments to the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) and its amendment are another pattern visible across India. The move to restrict receiving of foreign support is another development. The

FCRA is also used to harass human rights defenders and organisations critical of the neoliberal development model and pursuance of unsustainable development.

***Demographic impacts*:** There is much worry among the indigenous people that the proposed opening of trade and commerce and the infusion of major connectivity projects will lead to infusion of non-indigenous populations that can further decimate the cultures and traditions of indigenous peoples. In Manipur, the indigenous peoples have launched a strong protest to enact appropriate legislation to protect indigenous peoples' rights in their land and to check and regulate the entry of non-indigenous populations. Many in Manipur are worried about large-scale immigration into Northeast India from across the border. The major thrust in the exploitation of natural resources and infrastructure projects with skilled workers from outside the region will lead to an infusion of the population.[25]

People's responses

The effort to exploit natural resources is another cause of tensions in the region. The government's effort to mine uranium in Meghalaya has met with strong resistance from indigenous communities. As India has already signed agreements with Australia, Japan and Germany for peaceful nuclear cooperation, the fear of uninterrupted mining and exploitation of natural resources in Meghalaya is a serious concern. Several IFIs, including ADB and International Finance Corporation, co-financed the limestone mining operation in Meghalaya with Lafarge Group of France and Cementos Molins of Spain. The Lafarge Surma Cement (LSC) Project, run by Lafarge, received a loan of $45 million from the International Financial Corporation in 2003. In 2014, the Khasi people affected by limestone mining filed a complaint with the Compliance Advisor Ombudsman (CAO), the International Finance Corporation's accountability mechanism. The people complained that Lafarge had illegally infringed on their land without their consent. Similarly, the JICA-financed Tuirial Hydroelectric Project in Mizoram landed in controversy due to rehabilitation and resettlement. The project work was stopped in 2004 due to agitation overcompensation. The work resumed in 2011. Communities affected by the proposed Loktak

Downstream Multipurpose project envisaged for JICA financing feared that the project will worsen their livelihood.[26]

There is increased expression of concern and resistance to the increased targeting of people's land and natural resources from across the Northeast region, such as the increased objection to the building of mega-dams in Manipur, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, etc. and also to the efforts to privatise the 'unsustainable development' processes. The effort to drill oil and gas from across the region by multinational companies has also been met with wide objection, especially in Manipur and Assam. Objections were raised to agreements of the Government of Manipur with corporate bodies to mine chromite and limestone from the Ukhrul and Tengnoupal Districts of Manipur. Indigenous communities raised objections to the ongoing efforts of dam building companies like the National Hydroelectric Power Corporation to build dams like the 1500 MW Tipaimukh dam, the 1200 Lower Subansiri Hydroelectric Project, etc. with financing from the International financial institutions.

Rethinking the Act East policy in Northeast India

Concerns and questions abound as to how policies affecting communities, land and livelihood, but framed without the rightful involvement of communities, can ever benefit them. How can policies like the Act East policy be formulated without recognising their rights? Is the Act East policy responding to the economic and political development priorities of the indigenous peoples of the Northeast? Such policy seems to be serving the political and economic needs of the government, but also responding to China's rise and hegemony across the Asia-Pacific region. Overt infrastructure initiatives across the region under the Act East policy is more to facilitate the provision of necessary support to serve India's geopolitical and economic interest in ASEAN countries. Connectivity in real terms, as per the wishes and aspirations of the people of the region is not happening, primarily due to overt security concerns. Though the policy is meant primarily to help the Northeast, in reality, the benefits have been almost negligible.[27] The exclusion of the people from the decision-making

processes, and the overt focus on advancing and providing the rights and roles of corporate bodies in financing and implementing the policies and development processes, will only undermine the economic and political rights of indigenous peoples.

The massive infrastructure, financed by the international financial institutions, is marked by the non-recognition of indigenous peoples' rights and environmental sustainability. The massive financial investment by Japan in collaboration with the ADB and the World Bank is intended to further their economic and political interest. The massive infrastructure thrust has led to environmental damage and social impact. The lack of accountability of corporate bodies is a concern. The Act East policy is a clear manifestation of the propagation of neoliberal policies across India's Northeast region. An obvious reality is that infusion of capital is also associated with the increased assault and targeting of indigenous peoples' land and their rights, while multinational companies are reaping the full benefits and privileges of such financing. Militarism and the undemocratic nature of state and corporate power have intensified the targeting and expropriation of peoples' land and resources.

Counter-insurgency operations, and collaborations for counter-insurgency and to subdue indigenous peoples' fight for their rights and self-determination, have intensified since the implementation of the Act East policy, leading to human rights violations. The increased military cooperation between India, Japan and the US to counter China already created many tensions affecting India's Northeast. The pursuance of unsustainable and destructive development processes pushed indigenous peoples to the periphery of survival, compelling them to consolidate and deepen their struggle for their self-determination, for the defence of their land, their livelihood and survival and for their rights and dignity as peoples. The state's policies of subjugation, the militarisation of communities and suppression of resistance while facilitating corporate plunder of resources will deepen their resistance. The reliance on special emergency laws to control and subdue indigenous peoples to advance their political ambitions will be counterproductive. Formulation of any development strategy without involving and respecting the rights and aspirations of indigenous communities would be ineffective, and will unleash multi-layered conflict and sufferings on peoples' lives and destruction of the environment. The development discourses rooted in

colonialism, hegemony and neoliberalism fast unfolding across the region are simply antithesis to genuine development. The increased military repression, the undemocratic nature of development decision making and brutalities unleashed on communities also indicate the entire development agenda is to benefit the state and corporate bodies, not the people of the region. A clear rethinking of the relevance and implications of the Act East policy on the indigenous people of Northeast India is highly critical.

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8 Potential of Northeast India as a corridor for international trade

With special reference to trade between Tripura and Bangladesh *Barnali Roy and Arobindo Mahato*
Given the peculiar geopolitical location of India's Northeast, the cross-border markets are likely to be more effective for the region than the national markets. Thus, there is a reason that prompts us to think of a zone consisting of the Northeast region to be a target economic zone for international trading. It is a well-known fact that in the area of trade in goods, trade between two countries requires physical movement of goods. Here, the physical proximity plays a vital role, as the goods need to be transported. Considering this, the Northeast region has a huge potential to become a corridor for international trade. This is particularly true for the state of Tripura, which has three of its four sides surrounded by Bangladesh. The second reason to visualise international trade as the logical economic zone for the region in general, and Tripura in particular, is the cultural proximity of the region with the neighbouring country, since

economic links are not only about the movement of goods and services but also about links between people, traders and professionals. Considering all these factors, this chapter attempts to assess the potential of Northeast India in general, and Tripura in particular, to emerge as a successful corridor for international trade. It has been found that both formal and informal trade takes place between Tripura and Bangladesh, of which informal trade is more significant and a greater variety of items are traded. Also, a significantly higher proportion of trade takes place informally than formally.

Introduction

International trade refers to the trade that takes place between two countries. In this kind of trade, the exchange of goods and services takes place across international borders. It encompasses cross-border exchanges of goods and services between the countries. The term goods, here, refers to a tangible material that satisfies human wants and provides utility (Milgate 2008). These exchanges not only take place in exchange of money but also in the exchange of physical goods and even include international exchange of other resources, such as people, intellectual property (e.g. patents, copyrights, brand trademarks, data, etc.), and contractual assets or liabilities (e.g. the right to use some foreign asset, provide some future service to foreign customers, execute a complex financial instrument, etc.). The entities that take part in international trade vary from large multi-national enterprises, having thousands of employees and doing business in various

countries, to a small entrepreneur, working as an importer or exporter (Carpenter and Dunung 2011). Thus, the trade that occurs between the two countries may take place through and within various mentioned entities.

Trade between India and Bangladesh

The relation between India and Bangladesh has gone through many ups and downs ever since 1971. Though India had played a significant role during Bangladesh's liberation movement, this bond could not maintain the initial state of shared goodwill and interest. The trade between India and Bangladesh began following the liberation of Bangladesh from Pakistan in 1971, since the foremost requirement of Bangladesh was of consumer goods, mainly food, which then was delivered from India. After that, Bangladesh soon opened up its economy and initiated economic development by 1982. This, in turn, resulted in an increase in exports from India to Bangladesh (Sengupta 2007). Thus, the gain of trade between the two countries was recognised long back. Besides this, India and Bangladesh, as neighbours with deep-rooted and common historical links, have enjoyed the distinction of sharing rich cultural interactions, close interdependent economic ties and simultaneously political relations since the partition of Bangladesh (Chakraborty 2009). This relation was further strengthened by the people of the border themselves, with the long history of movements between people, cultures, beliefs, ideas and customs (Banerjee et al 1999).

Bangladesh and India share an odd trade profile compared to their overall trade with the rest of the world. While Bangladesh's export to the rest of the world is dominated by labour-intensive manufactured goods, its export to India is dominated by primary commodities and agricultural raw materials. Again, being a developing country, the total import of the country is reasonably dominated by manufactured goods. But its import from India is rather dominated by the primary commodities and food, instead of the manufactured goods. This shows the domination of intra-industry trade in their bilateral economic relationship (Basher 2013).

Trade between the two countries takes place through the common borders of the countries. By virtue of the boundaries shared with Bangladesh by

three out of four sides of Tripura, the people of Tripura get to enjoy the perks of trade with Bangladesh. Besides these, there are other important factors that contributed to the creation of needs and conditions for trade between Tripura and Bangladesh. Tripura and Bangladesh not only share long connecting boundaries but there are also many other linking factors. Few issues, like the employment of common rivers for flood control, irrigation and power generation as well as trade and investment relations, have been outstanding since the early days of Bangladesh (Islam 2004). The porous nature of the 856-km-long international border in Tripura, passing through forests, rivers and mountains, make the task of guarding it challenging. Due to the porous border, the trade between Tripura and Bangladesh gets a boon, by virtue of which the trade of Bangladesh with Tripura is mounting radically. As a result, this current trade volume of Bangladesh with India has become a significant issue in the recent period (Alam, Uddin and Alam 2009). However, one of the important features of Bangladesh-India bilateral trade is that a large volume of informal/unrecorded trade, both in commodities and services, occurs every year, and it is growing despite unilateral or regional or multilateral trade liberalisation in these two countries (Pohit and Taneja 2001).

As found in various studies, including the study by Wade (2014), more goods are imported from Bangladesh to India than what is exported from India. Thus, the need is to concentrate on industry extension services besides trade promotion services to increase production. Also, as found in the current study, the magnitudes of trade of both kinds are roughly the same, the reason behind which is the high tariff and non-tariff barriers in the region (Taneja and Pohit 2001). The close affinity between the local people with the people across the border compounds the problem even more, and catalyses informal trade or smuggling.

So, on the one hand, the trade relationship of Tripura and Bangladesh is wonderful and prospering due to social and cultural linkages catalysed by the advantage of proximity resulting in reduced transportation cost to get the commodities easily. The trade has increased by around $49 million since 1996 (Neogi 2013). Since then many policies have been undertaken by the governments of both countries to boost official trade between Bangladesh and Tripura.

On the other hand, this tempting means of livelihood has two faces: formal and informal. Since the rural poor encounter the unavailability of

required resources to trade formally, they often trade in informal ways. Hence, an efficient strategy is needed to bring the goods traded informally under formal trade, and thus improve rural livelihoods. Considering all these issues, the present study was attempted to assess the potential of Northeastern states of India in general, and Tripura in particular, to emerge as a successful corridor for international trade.

Aim and methodology

Being in a geographically disadvantageous location, the scope and condition of livelihood is not up to the mark in Tripura in comparison to other states of India, and even in comparison to Bangladesh, though the conditions in the latter are far behind the former's national average. This extreme difference could be the result of the geographical isolation of the region, particularly Tripura, compared to other Indian states. Disparately, there is the proximity of geographical location and even culture and ethnicity between Tripura and Bangladesh that fuels the trade between Tripura and Bangladesh. This study broadly aims to assess how Tripura is emerging as a successful corridor for international trade and to identify the potential factors behind it.

The study stands on available primary and secondary data, where secondary data has been collected from various government and non-government sources, and the primary data has been collected through the implementation of the interview method. The sample consisted of the traders who are engaged in trading goods with Bangladesh, as well as the associated government officials. Stratified random sampling method has been used for the identification of the sample, where indirect and direct involvement in formal and/or informal trading has been considered as the strata.

As stated, trade between Tripura and Bangladesh takes place both formally and informally, so the study area covers the rural areas near the trade points of both formal and informal trade. Pertaining to formal trade, Tripura has only road connectivity with Bangladesh, so for formal trade there are seven Land Custom Stations (LCSs) located at Muhurighat (Belonia), Srimanthapur (Sonamura), Akhaura (Agartala), Khowaighat

(Khowai), Dholaighat (Agartala), Manu (Kailashahar) and Old Ragnabazar (Dharmanagar).

For informal trade, no particular trade point is used. The boundary of Tripura that it shares with Bangladesh is 856km, and across the border, the informal trade is done (where and whenever possible). So, the research has been carried out in rural areas near all the four functional formal trade stations, namely, Srimanthapur (Sonamura), Akhaura (Agartala), Manu (Kailashahar) and Old Ragnabazar (Dharmanagar), and rural areas in proximity of the borders between Tripura and Bangladesh from where informal trade takes place. Since it has been found that the rest of the three LCSs are non-functional, they have been removed from the sampling.

This study started with qualitative and ended with quantitative methods of data collection. This has been done in order to gain some understanding, and also the possible responses to the prepared quantitative questionnaire. Both the qualitative and quantitative primary data have been collected using the questionnaire. A structured questionnaire (with a few pre-coded responses and closed and open-ended questions) has been used for the purpose of the interview. This study has certain limitations:

I. The small size of the sample is in itself a limitation;
II. The study has only considered trade in goods and not in services, which again limits the observations and conclusions made in the study; and
III. Trafficking in narcotics, drugs and arms have not been considered in the present study.

Trade between Tripura and Bangladesh

Since the people living on both sides of the border have age-old socio-economic links based on linguistic, cultural and ethnic affinities, which is particularly true in case of Tripura and Bangladesh, it has made the border a sanctuary for informal trade. As a result, the trade takes place both formally and informally.

Formal trade, in the context of the present study, refers to the trade that is officially recorded at the customs border with appropriate and fair import-

export duties that are to be charged. Formal trade passes through all the regulations of the participating countries and contributes towards the revenue generation and overall economic development of the trading countries. Pertaining to the informal trade, in the context of the present study, the trade that takes place between Tripura and Bangladesh is mostly quasi-legal, and thus may be rightly termed as informal trade. Informal trade, in this study, refers to the trade that takes place fully or partially unrecorded, and/or constitutes illegal and unfair practices of corruption including under-invoicing and misclassification. Unlike formal trade, it doesn't contribute towards the revenue generation and overall economic development of the trading countries. Rather, the profit made from it is pocketed by the traders, corrupt officials and middlemen.

Table 8.1 Items traded between Tripura and Bangladesh

Sl. No	*Formally*	*Informally*
1	Cement	Cement
2	Hardware and machinery	Hardware and machinery
3	Glass	Glass
4	Fish	Fish
5	Dry fish	Dry fish
6	Aluminium articles	Aluminium articles
7	Animal feed	Animal and poultry feed
8	Beverages	Beverages
9	Biscuits	Biscuits
10	Bricks	Bricks
11	Ceramic tiles	Ceramic tiles
12	Cosmetic items	Cosmetic items
13	Cotton	Cotton
14	Cotton waste	Cotton waste
15	Dry cell	Dry cell
16	Fertiliser	Fertiliser
17	Food products	Food products
18	GCI sheets	GCI sheets
19	Furniture	Furniture
20	Household articles	Household articles
21	Jute	Jute
22	Lay flat tube	Lay flat tube
23	Molasses	Molasses
24	Mosquito net	Mosquito net
25	PBC pipe	PBC pipe
26	Plastic item	Plastic item
27	Polythene sheets	Polythene sheets
28	Readymade garments	Readymade garments
29	Rope of jute	Rope of jute
30	SSC pipe	SSC pipe
31	Stone chips	Stone chips
32	Toilet items	Toilet items
33	Waste of wool	Waste of wool
34	Zinc flake	Zinc flake
35	Bamboo	Bamboo

36	Bay leaves	Bay leaves
38	Natural rubber	Natural rubber
39	Raw hides and skin	Raw hides and skin
40	Wood	Wood
41		C.T. Gold
42		Melamine items
43		Crab
44		Sari
45		Gamcha
46		Pickle
47		Tea
48		RFL plastic articles
49		Fruits including jackfruit, mango, pineapple, orange, wood apple (Bel), banana, etc.
50		Clothes/textiles including sari, lungi, jackets, pullovers, sweat shirts etc.
51		Pran products
52		Lungi
53		Fertilisers
54		Vegetables including ginger, papaya, tomato, potato, spring onion, carrot, etc.
55		Cumin (Jeera)
56		Ruchi gold edible oil
57		Shoes
58		Gold and silver jewellery
59		Spices
60		Raisins
61		Duck eggs
62		Turtles
63		Bicycles
64		Chicks
65		Baby food

Source: Field Survey, 2015–16

It has been found in the study that a significantly higher variety of items are traded informally than formally. In fact, all the products that are traded formally are also traded informally, plus there is a large variety of items that are only traded informally. One of the reasons behind a higher variety of items being traded informally is that a number of goods which are perishable in nature, such as fruits and vegetables, are not permitted to be traded formally, owing to various infrastructural bottlenecks. Besides these, goods like baby food, sugar, eggs and live animals like turtles and cattle, etc. are banned from being traded formally. But in spite of the ban, the demand for these products is high in Bangladesh, and consequently, considering the huge market for these items, these items are traded

informally by the rural people living in proximity of both sides of the border.

It has been found that the import of goods from Bangladesh has been consistent with high value and has been consistently increasing, with an exceptional decrease in the year 2013–2014. This high value of import and its continuous increasing tendency points towards the increasing dependency or acceptance of trade between Tripura and Bangladesh by the local people of both sides. Another observation that may be made on the basis of the table (Table 8.2) is that it not just the number of traders and the frequency of trade that have increased, but also the consumers in Tripura, who are the main stakeholders of the trade taking place between Tripura and Bangladesh since it is they whose demand and acceptance leads to trade across borders. Again, pertaining to the export value, it tends to be exceptionally low and the trade balance has, in the context of Tripura, been found to be decreasing. This calls for an increment of the export basket by allotment of permission to trade in general, and export in particular, the tangible goods that are otherwise traded only informally, and also channelling the informal export in the formal path through the implementation of proper planning may serve the purpose.

The study shows that the composition of import is dominated by a variety of fish and dry fish from Bangladesh. One of the reasons behind this could be the dominance of the Bengali population in both sides of the border who, by characteristic, depend on fish for their daily consumption, which again points towards the fact that the similarity of culture and existence of diaspora plays a vital role in the cross-border trade and determines, to a certain point, the composition of trade. Fish import amounts to a total of Rs. 122.11 crore out of Rs. 381.76 crore of the total import that has taken place between Tripura and Bangladesh in the FY 2015–2016. This is followed by import of stone chips, which accounts to Rs. 103.19 crore, though these are not produced in Bangladesh but rather come via Bangladesh. The product with the third-highest value of import is cement, which accounts for Rs. 95.49 crore, followed by food items (holds a value of Rs. 19.35 crore), and plastic goods (holds a value of 16.89 crore) respectively. Other goods, including garments, waste of wool, cotton etc. of the cumulative value of Rs. 24.73 crore tends to form the last portion of the total import.

Table 8.2 Volume of formal trade between Tripura and Bangladesh (Rs. in crore)

Year	Import	Export	Total
2006–2007	48.69	0.87	49.56
2007–2008	84.15	1.51	85.66
2008–2009	125.94	0.26	126.2
2009–2010	162.88	0.42	163.3
2010–2011	255.88	1.72	257.6
2011–2012	329.05	1.55	330.6
2012–2013	342.65	0.41	343.06
2013–2014	229.83	0.41	230.24
2014–2015	357.65	1.02	358.67
2015–2016	381.76	1.96	383.72

Source: Government of Tripura 2016

Table 8.3 Commodity-wise composition of imports through Land Custom Stations in 2015–2016

Composition of imports (commodity-wise)	
Commodity	*Total value (Rs. in crore)*
Variety of fish and dry fish	122.11
Cement	95.49
Broken/crushed stones	103.19
Food items/soft drinks	19.35
Plastic goods	16.89
Other commodities	24.73
Total	381.76

Source: Government of Tripura 2016.

Table 8.4 Commodity-wise composition of exports through Land Custom Stations in 2015–2016

Commodity	*Total value (Rs. in crore)*
Citrus fruits	0.24
Electronics	0.23
Food items	1.05
Other commodities	0.43
Total	1.96

Source: Government of Tripura 2016.

The study reveals that the composition of export is dominated by food items, followed by citrus fruits and electronic goods, respectively. This dominance of food items in the composition of commodities that are exported again points towards the prevailing similarity between food habits and choices, and also the dependency of people on the same. Export of food

items amounts to as high as Rs. 1.05 crore out of the total export value of Rs. 1.96 crore. This is followed by the export of citrus fruits (holding a value of Rs. 0.24 crore) and electronic goods (holding a value of Rs. 0.23 crore) respectively. The other commodities have also made a significant proportion of the total export in the financial year 2015–2016 i.e. Rs. 43 lakh.

Trade through Border Haats

The study shows that the Border Haats (local trade markets)[1] are doing particularly well in the current picture of trade between Tripura and Bangladesh, and adding a remarkable amount to the export basket of Tripura, thus contributing to increasing trade balance in Tripura's context. The total value of the commodities sold by the Indian traders at the Border Haats accounts to Rs. 5.95 crore including Rs. 2.99 crore of sale in Srinagar-Chhangalnaiya Border Haat and Rs. 2.96 crore of sale in Kamalasagar-Tarapur Border Haat. Again, the sale in Bangladesh's part through these Border Haats tend to be low, and accounted for a total of Rs. 1.78 crore, including Rs. 1.22 crore in Srinagar-Chhangalnaiya Border Haat and Rs. 0.56 crore in Kamalasagar-Tarapur Border Haat. Thus, clearly, the Border Haats are, besides providing employment opportunities to the rural people and a market for the rural products, are also pulling the trade balance, of India in general and Tripura in particular.

Table 8.5 Total export value from Land Custom Stations and Border Haats in Tripura in 2015–2016

Total export value in 2015–2016	*Total export value in 2015–2016 (crore)*
Agartala Land Custom Station	0.24
Srimantapur Land Custom Station	0.59
Muhurighat Land Custom Station	0
Manughat Land Custom Station	0.07
Khowaighat Land Custom Station	0
Old Ragnabazar Land Custom Station	1.06
Srinagar- Chhangalnaiya Border Haat	2.99
Kamalasagar-Tarapur Border Haat	2.96

Source: Government of Tripura 2016

The study reveals that the Border Haats tend to be a vital source of trading Tripura's products to Bangladesh. The Border Haats shows an exceptionally high value of trade in 2015–2016, since their inception, which is higher than the value of export through all the active Land Custom Stations coming together. The two Border Haats, namely Srinagar-Chhangalnaiya and Kamal-sagar-Tarapur, in the financial year 2015–2016, have been found to show a sale of Rs. 5.95 crore on Tripura's side, which is almost thrice the value of what has been exported altogether through the four active Land Custom Stations, that accounts to be of only Rs. 1.96 crore, in Tripura in the financial year 2015–2016. The high frequency of trade through the Border Haats points toward the capability of rural Tripura to make a mark in the export scenario as well as the need of such Border Haats in order to increase Tripura's trade balance with Bangladesh.

Proportion of trade through formal and informal points

It has been found in the study that cumbersome amount of goods–in other words, the cumulative economic value of the items that are traded through the informal points– amount to an associated value of Rs. 1.23 crore and Rs. 67.43 crore of export and import respectively, whereas, the total formal import and export between Tripura and Bangladesh in the FY2015–2016 have been only Rs. 1.96 crore and Rs. 381.76 crore, respectively. This has given the study an opportunity to understand the value of the informal trade that takes place through various informal trade points. It needs to be mentioned here that the value of the trade that has been calculated is associated with the trade that takes place through the few (17 to be specific) informal trade points that have been identified in the course of this study. This also indicates the vast proportion of trade possible throughout the order and the ability of users of the rural resources for the same. Again, the import through these points, though quite huge, tends to be lower in proportion in comparison to the import done through informal points than that of the export. This suggests that the potential of people of Tripura to do trade with Bangladesh is much higher than what is actually acknowledged

by the formal picture, and may yield higher revenue than the present if managed in the right way, through the implementation of proper steps and policies.

Factors of formal trade

In the case of formal trade, there are certain factors that are working behind the current condition of the trade. The factors that work in the context of formal trade are of two kinds: the factors that work for increasing the scope and market for formal trade, and the factors that limit the proportion of goods traded formally. In the case of the former, i.e. the factors contributing to the existing and growing trade between Tripura and Bangladesh, these are the easy access to the markets, high profit from trade, geographical proximity of Tripura and Bangladesh resulting to low transportation cost, cultural similarities, diaspora and, of course, comparative and absolute advantages in certain cases.

Motivational factors behind trade between Tripura and Bangladesh

It has been found in the study that multiple factors have been found to inspire and encourage people to get involved in international trade with Bangladesh. Also, multiple responses or factors have been pointed to by individuals. The three key factors that have been found to be supported by most of the key informant interviewees as responsible for the existing and growing trade between Tripura and Bangladesh are easy to access to markets (100 percent), geographical proximity (94.23 percent) and diaspora (92.31 percent). This again establishes that Tripura and Bangladesh, as neighbours with a deep-rooted and common historical legacy, enjoy the distinction of sharing rich cultural interactions and close interdependent economic links. Additional factors that have come out include low transportation cost (76.92 percent), the similarity of language (50 percent),

corruption in the borders (44.23 percent) and high profit from trade (32.69 percent).

Barriers in formal trade

The study shows that there are also some factors that acted as barriers to informal trading. The most vital one among these factors has been found to be the prohibition of some items from trading (like perishable goods such as vegetables and fruits, ornaments etc. that may not be traded formally), as claimed by 78.85 percent, followed by unruly behaviour of officials (71.15 percent), warehousing difficulties (61.54 percent), hassle in formal trade (61.54 percent) and corruption (53.84 percent).

It has been found in the study that the existing customs procedures and documentation are not transparent. Consequently, most of the exporters have to hire clearing agents on a charge basis in order to take up the responsibilities of all the paperwork at the customs office, and even have to bear an overtime allowance of customs staff in case the exporters desire to have their consignment to be cleared faster and/or before or after the scheduled working hours of customs. Another important problem with the points of formal trading, as claimed by a few key informant interviewees, is that the entry point at Land Custom Stations is only one gate which is used for import and export as well as for passenger movement, leading to congestion of the traffic point and wastage of time.

Factors of informal trade

Just like formal trade, the factors that work in the context of informal trade are also of two kinds, one that works for increasing the scope and market for informal trade and, second, the factors that limit the proportion of goods traded informally. The factor for the latter tends to be the only obvious one, that is, the imposed rules of law against the informal trade. But the factors

working for increasing the scope and market for informal trade are many, and include:

I. Various tariff and non-tariff barriers consisting of high legal and illegal charges in the form of custom clearance duties;
II. Banning or prevention of various goods to be exported from Tripura, including perishable items like fruits and vegetables, cosmetics, etc. by the formal trade channels;
III. A high degree of profit with less hassle from informal trade;
IV. Practices of corruption leading to easy accessibility to the market of Bangladesh; and
V. Hassle-free transactions and trading on the basis of credit, etc.

Catalysing factors behind people's involvement in informal trade

A dire condition reflecting the higher frequency of informal trading than formal trading has been reflected by the study. A number of factors have been found to be working behind this which are higher profit, as accepted by all (100 percent) key informant interviewees, followed by other factors, including higher variety of items to be traded (as there are a number of items like perishable goods such as vegetables and fruits, ornaments etc. that may not be traded formally but are traded informally) which has been claimed by 88.46 percent of the respondents. Other factors are: a hassle in formal trade (53.85 percent), easy access to the market (48.08 percent) and corruption (44.23 percent[2]). Thus, clearly, there are many tariff and non-tariff barriers behind the current picture of bulk informal trading between Tripura and Bangladesh, and these need to be tackled in order to channel the items traded informally to formal trade.

Conclusion and recommendations

A large quantity of trade takes place between Tripura and Bangladesh by virtue of their proximity, and the dependency of the people alongside the borders on each other. It has been found in the study that as a result of the various geographical and technical factors, trade takes place both formally and informally, and in fact, the proportion of informal trade tends to be remarkably high in the case of both import and export. It has been found that a number of processes of informal trading are followed by the people of Tripura and Bangladesh, which include trading through unfenced and broken borders, trading through the gates present throughout the fence between Tripura and Bangladesh, etc. The people from both sides of the border also take part in the practice of informal trading while visiting Bangladesh and Tripura as tourists. Beside these, informal trade practices also take place at the Land Custom Stations by means of illegal practices such as under-invoicing, misclassification and bribery of customs and other officials in order to avoid payment of appropriate taxes, earn a higher amount of profit, cheat the quality tests, get the work done fast, not pay duties at border markets, etc.

Considering the proportion of informal trade, it would not be incorrect to say that Tripura has a great potential to trade with Bangladesh and contribute to the management of the country's balance of trade with Bangladesh. For this, what is required is liberalisation of trading activities in general and formalisation, at least in parts, of the existing informal trade. The legalisation of these trading activities will encourage the involvement of such people in border trade who may be currently dissuaded from it because of its illegal status. It will also enable governments to earn revenue through the imposition of duties on imports and exports. Currently, this potential government earning is being pocketed by agents and corrupt officials in return for facilitating informal trade.

Besides these, one major constraint in the economic development of Northeast India in general, and Tripura in particular, is its geographical isolation, resulting in lack of easy access to the markets outside the region. But the improvement of border trade can remove this bottleneck. Moreover, the expansion of trading activities along the border is bound to have a spin-off for related sectors of transport, storage, communication, hotels and restaurants, banking and insurance, etc. which in turn will also serve the cause of overall economic development of Tripura and the Northeast region as a whole. Also, the current volume of informal trade between Tripura and

Bangladesh suggest that there is abundant scope for beneficial mutual exchange through legitimate channels. Thus, it is expected that the fostering of border trade between Tripura and Bangladesh will, inter alia, help in increasing the economic activities of the border areas as a result of which the employment and income scenario will improve. Finally, on the basis of this study, the following suggestions have been made for the improvement of trade between Tripura and Bangladesh: *Formation of traders' forum to bring in the participation of the stakeholders:* It has been highly recommended by the traders, as well as felt during the study, that it will be highly beneficial for the traders as well as the economy of Tripura if a traders' forum is constituted. The forum may be a vital body as the stakeholders will themselves be there to suggest the policies and programmes that will be beneficial for the trade taking place between Tripura and Bangladesh. Also, with that large proportion of members and their ideas, there will be many choices to choose the best possible solution for the problems and for bringing development of trade in a true sense.

Establishment of more Border Haats: With the limited number of Border Haats, only a handful of traders and rural people get the chance to take part in trade between Tripura and Bangladesh. Thus, a larger number of Border Haats and shops will consequently result in larger opportunities for the rural people and higher participation. This will ultimately result in bringing the bulk of products traded informally under the formula of formal trade, besides opening a vast number of opportunities of employment and income generation for the rural people.

Opening a branch of a foreign bank, especially from Bangladesh: This might be difficult in practice, as it will involve a huge hassle to do the same by the government. But if implemented, it will certainly catalyse the tendency of people to take part in the formal trade, as it will cut a lot of hassle that is presently faced by the traders at both sides of the border in transaction and billing.

Training and monitoring of officials recruited at Land Customs Stations as well as borders to prevent corruption and unfriendly behaviour by the officials: Among the many problems faced by the people taking part in trade, corruption and unfriendly behaviour of the officials tends to be a vital one. Thus, training and monitoring of the officials recruited at Land Custom Stations as well as borders will not only prevent corruption and unfriendly behaviour of the officials, but also inspire the informal traders to trade

informal ways, thus channelling the bulk traded under the umbrella of informal trade into the formal picture.

Fencing of the unfenced borders: Fencing all the fences is again a very important step that is needed to be taken, as it will prevent a lot of informal trading activities. Besidesthis, it will also check infiltration and smuggling through the unfenced spaces.

Facilitation of cooperative trading, where individuals may come together with their goods and sell it all as one: This again can be a beneficial step on the part of the rural poor traders, and provide them with the opportunity to earn a better livelihood through cooperative efforts. This will not only provide them with a bigger market and higher opportunities for selling their products, but also help them by dividing the possible loss in the venture among the group. Also, they can then bring their resources together to make higher earnings from the bulk, as it is a challenge in itself to sell a small amount of product in the international market and yield comparatively less gain.

Notes

1 A Border Haat is a local market located on the India-Bangladesh border. Both Indian and Bangladeshi nationals residing within a distance of five kilometers from the border are allowed to visit and purchase goods from vendors, who are also from both countries in equal numbers.

2 In case of the trade that takes place between Tripura and Bangladesh, the corruption is witnessed in many ways including letting the informal traders go to and fro by opening border gates of the fences in exchange for money or goods, under-invoicing, misclassification of goods, compromising in quality testing, etc.

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9 Borders as capillaries for economic exchanges

Nathula Pass in Sikkim and its implications for Northeast India *Sangay Lachenpa* The reopening of Nathula Pass heralded a new epoch in the Sino-Indian relations in general, and in particular in the context of border trade in the state of Sikkim. The expected outcome of the reopening was one of the great potentials in terms of trade and confidence-building measures. However, even a decade after its opening, the potential is yet to be realised; instead, it has been undermined under the larger structure of border tensions and territorial disputes. Sikkim, which has shown considerable enthusiasm for the reopening of Nathula Pass and its future potential, needs to look beyond Nathula Pass and instead should focus on and embrace the Act East policy until the situation becomes suitable for the full potential of Nathula Pass to be tapped.

Introduction

The reopening of Nathula Pass in 2006 heralded a new epoch in Sino-Indian relations, particularly in the context of border trade from Sikkim. The reopening, 44 years after its closure in the aftermath of 1962 Sino-Indian border skirmishes, highlights a major shift in larger Sino-Indian relations, with culturally contiguous Sikkim and Tibet as the primer of border trade between two emerging global economies. The Nathula Pass through the centuries had served as an important market for trade, sharing of ideas and cultural exchanges. The consolidation of the homogenous nation-states of China and India has altered the geopolitics of the region. Nathula Pass served as a trade nexus between India and China, and later as a military outpost along the ‘fortified’ border. The cartographic politics between India and China have subsumed indigenous communities as border citizens, with ‘hardening’ of the border, who remain outside the framework of the McMahon line.[1] The closure of Nathula Pass caused the (dependent) economies of both Sikkim and Tibet, which have historically over generations depended upon each other, to turn ‘inwards’. Sikkim is realising it by attracting and investing in tourism and by catering to the larger Indian domestic market. The reopening, therefore, brought renewed hopes among the local populations, particularly within the statist domain, media and academicians.

Sikkim's historical inclination towards the north

Sikkim, which is located on the northern border of Darjeeling district of West Bengal, shares a land border with Nepal to the west and Bhutan to the east, while to its north and northeast is Tibet. The state occupies the most important strategic location in the Himalayas, as it is located in the centre where the border touches Tibet, Nepal and Bhutan (Karan and Jenkins 1963, 56; Risley 1894, 10). The state shares a 220-km-long border with Tibet and as such, it shares religious, cultural and historical proximity with Tibet. The tradition of looking towards the north for trade, polity and society shaped and influenced Sikkim’s historiographic traditions. The state is landlocked, and motorable roads are the only means of physical connectivity within the state. The state is connected by national highway No. 10 (earlier known as No. 31A) with the rest of the country.

The dominant historical narrative of state formation started in Sikkim in the year 1642 (Mullard 2011), the year that marked the first consecration of Chogyal, or the Dharma Raja of the Namgyal dynasty, which ruled till 1975. According to cartographic records, the Lamas who consecrated the first Chogyal were all from Tibet. Buddhism (Tibetan Buddhism) became the state religion, and Chogyal himself was a follower of the Nyingmapa sect of Buddhism with its origin in Tibet (Chakrabarty 1980). Sikkim established close political ties with Tibet, and they latter patronised Sikkim as a 'dependent vassal' state (Karan and Jenkins 1963; Risley 1894). It is clear that its modern political history is closely related to its northern border, and yet Sikkim's history is not the history of its neighbours.

Throughout the period of the Namgyal dynasty, the kingdom looked northward in terms of political advice (patronage), seeking refuge and also for matrimonial affairs. The Sikkimese rulers had always sought refuge in Tibet when they faced domestic turmoil and external threats from Gurkhas and Bhutan. The third Chogyal, Chokdor Namgyal, fled and took refuge in Lhasa when he was attacked by the Bhutanese forces (Coelho 1971). The Rabdentse Palace was captured by the Bhutanese for eight years from 1700 to 1708[2] when Bhutan withdrew following the Tibetan intervention. During the subsequent Gurkha invasion in 1788–89, the Chogyal, Tenzing Namgyal, fled to Tibet when his capital Rabdentse was captured by the Gurkhas (Coelho 1971), and he died in Tibet in 1793.

The legacy of Sikkim's fascination of looking north came in handy for British India's policy towards Tibet. The accessible passes along the Himalayas into the Tibetan plateau through Sikkim gave British and Sikkim advantage in terms of trade and exchange of culture. Aware of the importance of its strategic location, the British entered Sikkim in 1817 after the signing of the Treaty of Titalia with the twin objectives of security and trade with Tibet (see Grover 1974; Hittz 2003; Risley 1894; Marshall 2005). The British were aware of its geo-strategic importance. It is worth mentioning here that distance from Lhasa to Sikkim is about 520 km, whereas, through Kathmandu, it is about 1,000 km. Moreover, the passes through Sikkim are easily traversable and negotiable. The treaty between Sikkim and British India, which was signed in 1861 at Tumlong, then capital of Sikkim, made the kingdom the *de facto* protectorate of the British. In its 21 Articles, it also gave the Government of India (then British

India) the right to construct a road through the kingdom stretching up to Tibetan border (Grover 1974; Marshall 2005).

Following this development, in 1873, British India deputed John Ware Edgar, Deputy Commissioner of Darjeeling, to investigate a possibility of a trade route with Tibet. He travelled through Darjeeling hills and through Sikkim (Kuloy 1969; Risley 1894). Edgar remarked in his travel journal when he camped at a place called Keu Laka and meeting a family of herdsmen. These people, during the summer months, live in the valley of Tibet, and when the snow begins to fall on the uplands, they drive their sheep and cattle to the lower slopes of Sikkim. He mentioned meeting some Tibetan traders who were proceeding towards Darjeeling (Kuloy 1969). It is therefore interesting to note here that, more than trade, these passes were used by herdsman from both Sikkim and Tibet for grazing. The outcome of Edgar's visit to Sikkim and the Tibetan border was the construction of a road through Sikkim to the Tibetan border.

In 1884, British India deputed a mission under Colman Macaulay, the Secretary to the Government of Bengal to Tibet (Grover 1974; Risley 1894; Marshall 2005) to secure a possibility of trade through the northern part of Sikkim with the Tibetan province of Tsang. The mission was, however, withdrawn due to the wishes of the Chinese. Shortly after the mission left Tibet, the Tibetans occupied a strip of land in the south of Jelep La, called Lingtu, which belonged to Sikkim, and also constructed a stone fort which commanded the road between India and Tibet. British India could not afford to lose this strategic strip of land. In the year 1888, British India sent a military expedition which culminated in the Anglo-Tibetan war and drove Tibetans out of Lingtu. The defeat of Tibetans further cemented British influence in Sikkim, and the Anglo-Chinese Convention was signed on March 17, 1890. The convention, signed in Calcutta by Lord Lans-downe, Viceroy and Governor General of India and Amban Shen Tai, Imperial Associate Resident in Tibet, officially laid down the boundary between Sikkim and Tibet. The convention adopted the crest of the mountain range separating the water flowing into Teesta in Sikkim and its effluent from the water flowing into the Tibetan Mochu and northwards into other rivers of Tibet (Grover 1974; Risley 1894; Marshall 2005). The boundary between Tibet and Sikkim is regulated by the convention, unlike in Arunachal Pradesh, where the McMahon line divides India from China.

The convention resulted in the proper demarcation of the border, which further led to the signing of the Trade Regulations in 1893. This regulation was the first official agreement related to the trade. The Trade Regulations were signed at Darjeeling by A.W. Paul for the Government of India and Ho-Chang Jung for China (Marshall 2005). This trade through Sikkim (via Nathula Pass) continued till 1962, when it was closed following the Sino-Indian war. Sikkim's fascination with looking north continues to this day. The state government have been urging the central government to open up Nathula Pass and resume border trade. This culminated in the opening up of the trade route in 2006.

Opening of Nathula Pass

The 1962 Sino-Indian border skirmishes incidentally sealed opportunities of border negotiations, thereby leading to the fortification of the border. It was in the 1980s that the negotiation of unresolved border issues resumed. The border disputes remain as an irritant in bilateral relations. Even China's reluctance to recognise Sikkim as an integral part of India remained an irritant in the bilateral relations. Upon Sikkim's inclusion in India in 1975, the local people showed commitment to reviving trade for commercial interests. The state government petitioned the central government on several occasions. The resumption of trade ties through Nathula Pass has enormous potential to boost Sikkim's dependent economy through the promotion of tourism and trade.

China accepted Sikkim as an integral part of India when former Indian foreign minister Jaswant Singh visited the country in 2002. Singh took up the issue with his Chinese counterpart. China's assurance to look into the matter and its policy was announced when the Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao visited India (Shukla 2007). When Atal Bihari Vajpayee, the then Prime Minister of India, visited Sikkim in April 2003, the state government submitted a memorandum for early opening of Nathula Pass.

In June 2003, Vajpayee and Jiabao signed the Declaration of Principles for Relations and Comprehensive Cooperation in Beijing. Apart from this, there were nine other agreements which included the memorandum on expanding border trade that provided for the formal reopening of Nathula

Pass as a border trade pass. The memorandum declared the opening up of the third border pass through Nathula Pass while adhering to the Memorandum on Resumption of Border Trade signed in 1991, and the Protocol on Entry and Exit Procedures for Border Trade signed in 1992 (Das 2006). The agreement designated Changgu in Sikkim as the venue for a border trade market[3], and Renqinggang in the Tibetan Autonomous Region as the venue for another border trade market (Article I). Article II of the memorandum posits that the two sides will use Nathula Pass as the pass for entry and exit of persons, means of transport and commodities engaged in border trade (Ministry of External Affairs 2003).

India regarded this memorandum as an indication of China's acceptance of Nathula Pass as the border between the two countries and by default, Sikkim as an integral part of India. Finally, border trade resumed on July 6, 2006, after a gap of 44 years. The minutes of the official meeting reiterated that the border trade shall remain open from 1 July to 30 September every year from Monday to Thursday from 7:30 am to 3:30 pm (Indian time), and 10 am to 6 pm (Chinese time). A permit fee of Rupees 50 would be levied on every vehicle entering Sikkim from China, and similarly 5 Yuans on every vehicle crossing over to the Chinese side of the trademart which is located at Renquinggang (Government of Sikkim 2006).

The opening of Nathula Pass as a third border trading point[4] indicates China's full acceptance of Sikkim as an integral part of India. India has been pursuing the reopening of Nathula since 1993, when Shipki La and Lipu Lekh were opened. However, differences with China's position on Sikkim as an integral part of India stalled the process of reviving border trade through Nathula Pass.

Impact of the opening of Nathula Pass

The direct outcome of opening trade through Nathula Pass falls on Sikkim. The agriculture and its allied sector is the mainstay of the economy of the state (Table 9.1). Though only 15 percent of its total geographical area is utilised for agriculture, over 60 percent of the population is engaged in agriculture. The major crops grown are rice, maize, cardamom, vegetables

and fruits. As such, development of agriculture becomes paramount for the well-being of the people. Sikkim being a mountainous topography, two-thirds of its land is unsuitable for cultivation, and hence organic farming is one of the key strengths of the region. This flows from the fact that agriculture in Sikkim over the centuries has largely been traditional and conservational to the ecology, and the use of chemical fertilisers has been minimal. For example, average fertiliser use on one lakh hectares of farmland in the state has been about 12kg/ha, as compared to the national average of 90kg/ha (Government of Sikkim 2014).

The policy of promoting organic farming has led to a mushrooming of organic-based agri-business enterprises in the state providing self-employment not only to the farmers but also to the educated youth. The increase in demand for organic products, both in the national and international markets, has led to an increase in production of cardamom, ginger, oranges, tea, passion fruit and other species of mountain vegetables. The state is the largest producer of cardamom in the country. Today, the state has already been recognised as an ‘organic state’.

Due to its geographical location, Tibet is an arid region where agriculture is not developed. Therefore, Nathula Pass’s proximity to Lhasa has an advantage of a huge surge in demand for agricultural products from Sikkim. This is an opportunity for the Sikkimese to generate income. Moreover, the high-value commodities, including horticulture and floriculture, are also in high demand. With the rising demands, there is ample scope for expanding such economic ventures from Sikkim into similar cultural demographic regions such as Darjeeling and the rest of Northeast India.

The regions adjacent to Sikkim, such as Darjeeling hill, Assam, etc. produce a large quantity of tea, and hence the opening up of Nathula Pass provides these areas with new markets. The success of organic farming in the state can be taken as ‘experienced-based learning’ for other states of the country. Following Sikkim’s success in organic farming, the state of Mizoram has also shown interest in investing in organic agriculture. The Northeastern states have a huge advantage for organic-based farming since community farming practices in Sikkim and other Northeastern states are identical. Unlike the rest of India, the green revolution with its core idea of using high yielding and extensive chemicals has not reached this part of the country. Moreover, agriculture is still practised in the traditional way, and so the use of chemical fertiliser has been minimal.

The reopening of Nathula Pass is expected to boost manufacturing and industrial activities in the state. Though the state lacks industries, there are many new small- to medium-scale industries which are both public and private enterprises. The small-scale industries, especially wool and silk-based industries, have a richer potential to grow. Raw wool and silk from China are considered to be some of the finest. The Nathula Pass would be a gateway for the import of these raw materials, which are in great demand in the northeast region in general and Sikkim in particular. Handicrafts have been one of the traditional and oldest industries in Sikkim, and the same applies to the entirety of the Northeastern states. Carpets, bamboo products and paintings, which have high value in China, can be exported through Nathula Pass.

Table 9.1 Sectoral distribution of workers in Sikkim

	Rural			*Urban*			*Total*		
	Male	*Female*	*Total*	*Male*	*Female*	*Total*	*Male*	*Female*	*Total*
Primary	62	86	73	1	3	1	50	77	62
Secondary	16	5	11	25	10	20	18	6	13
Tertiary	22	9	16	74	88	78	32	18	26

Source: 68th NSS Round (2011–2012)

Table 9.2 Working population in Sikkim

	1981	*1991*	*2001*	*2011*
Population	316,385	406,457	540,851	610,577
Total workers	152,814	168,721	263,043	308,138
Main workers	147,436	164,392	212,904	230,397
Cultivators	88,610	97,834	101,200	82,707
Agricultural labourers	4,887	13,793	9,081	11,582
Workers in household industry	1,586	1,309	3,168	2,888
Other workers	52,353	55,785	99,455	133,220
Marginal workers	5,378	4,329	50,139	77,741
Non-workers	163,571	237,736	277,808	302,439

Source: Census of India 1981, 1991, 2001 and 2011

The third aspect upon which the opening of Nathula Pass will have an impact in Sikkim is tourism. Today, the tourism industry generates direct and indirect employment for a large number of people. It is one of the

primary revenue generating sectors as far as the state is concerned. In 2005–2006, about three lakh tourists visited Sikkim. By 2016, this figure had doubled, with a total of 740,763 domestic tourists and 66,012 foreign tourists (Datamation Consultants Pvt. Ltd 2012). The figure for 2017 showed an increase of nearly 57 percent, totalling 1,424,965 tourists (Table 9.3). Among the contributors of foreign tourists, the United States of America is the highest contributor with about 21 percent, followed by the United Kingdom with 12 percent. China and Russia together contributed only 0.8 percent.[5] This may be attributed to the fact that the Indian government has restricted the entry of nationals from China, Pakistan, Myanmar, Bangladesh and Nigeria. The permits to enter Sikkim for nationals from these countries are issued only with the approval of the Ministry of Home Affairs. Nonetheless, the opening of Nathula Pass would surely open up Sikkim as a tourist hub, which is also a thrust area of the Act East policy.

Table 9.3 Tourist arrival in Sikkim

Year	*Domestic Tourists*	*Foreign Tourists*	*Total*
2010	700,011	20,757	720,768
2011	552,453	23,945	576,398
2012	558,538	26,489	585,027
2013	576,749	31,698	608,447
2014	562,418	49,175	611,593
2015	705,023	38,479	743,502
2016	740,763	66,012	806,775
2017	1,375,854	49,111	1,424,965

Source: Department of Tourism and Civil Aviation, Government of Sikkim

The tourism sector has been further boosted with the opening of Kailash Mansarovar Yatra through Nathula Pass. Thousands of Hindu pilgrims visit Mansarovar through trekking the Pithogarh-Nepal route, which takes a long time and the terrain is dangerous and risky. The route through Nathula Pass is motorable and it is only 500 km from Nathula Pass. This makes the pilgrimage easy and comfortable.

Sikkim and Tibet share a cultural proximity in the form of Tibetan Buddhism. Therefore, Nathula Pass will promote pilgrimage tourism to the monasteries on both the sides of the border, and also to the Buddhist holy site of Bodh Gaya in the northern state of Bihar and the adjoining places.

Today the pilgrimage tourism which is happening in a limited way has a great potential for the development of the tourism industry. Though in Sikkim, the agriculture and allied activities remain the main economic activity of the people, the tourism sector has achieved greater participation of people and the attention of policymakers.

The Ministry of Tourism of India has identified three Buddhist circuits in India to be developed by the public and private stakeholders. The first circuit is the Dharmayatra or the Sacred Circuit comprising of Gaya (Bodh Gaya), Varanasi (Sarnath), Kushinagar, Piparva (Kapilvastu) and Lumbini in Nepal. The second circuit is the Extended Dharmayatra or Extended Sacred Circuit which include visits to Bodh Gaya (Nalanda, Rajgir, Barabar caves, Pragbodhi Hill, Gaya), Patna (Vaishali, Lauriya Nandangarh, Lauriya Areraj, Kesariya, Patna Museum), Varanasi (Sarnath), Kushinagar and Piparva (Kapilvastu, Shravasti, Sankisa) with a day trip to Lumbini in Nepal. The third circuit is the Buddhist Heritage Trails or the State Circuits which consist of different states including Sikkim, Arunachal Pradesh and West Bengal (Government of India 2015).

The spread of Buddhism to Sikkim predates many centuries. The society, culture and polity have been influenced by Buddhism in many ways. As a result, this place has been bestowed with many eminent Buddhist monasteries and a significant number of Buddhist religious sites. These include monasteries such as the Pemayangtse Monastery, which was built in 1705, and Rumtek Monastery, which is considered one of the revered seats of the Kagyu sect of Tibetan Buddhism outside Tibet. Other important monasteries are Phodong, Enchey, Tholung and Ralang monasteries. Apart from these monasteries, there are other Buddhist religious sites such as Tashiding, Chungthang and Gurudongmar Lake which are believed to be blessed by Guru Padmasambhava, the patron saint of Sikkim, who is credited with spreading Buddhism into Tibet. In short, Nathula Pass can act as a gateway for tourism to Sikkim and other Buddhist sites in India.

Problems with Nathula Pass and Sikkim's need of the Act East policy

Though the Nathula Pass has been re-opened, its future looks bleak and ambiguous, clouded under the larger ambit of Sino-Indian relations. Sino-Indian relations after the 1962 war have been going through a rough phase. The territorial dispute in the Himalayas has been the core problem area in their relations. India and China have territorial disputes both in the Eastern and Western Himalayas. China posits that India has been occupying their territory in Arunachal Pradesh, and India accuses China of occupying the Indian territory of Akshai Chin.

The recent happening at Doklam plateau at the tri-junction of India-China-Bhutan is the latest in the series of confrontations between the two countries. This has resulted in the domination of the security-centred policy framework in the border state by the central government. As such, Nathula Pass doesn't offer much for overall development, both in terms of trade and development. There is a restriction on the free movement of goods and people. Sikkim, therefore, needs to open up through a different area (southern) and keep the centuries-old practice of 'looking north' at bay until the state of affairs becomes favourable.

The territorial dispute between China and India have made the Himalayan borders a restricted zone, and national discourses on both the sides of the border have made the territorial dispute the top priority in determining the national interest pronouncements and foreign policy actions (Lama 2016, 40). In this process, two situations have arisen in the Himalayan borderlands. The first one is the securitisation of the area. The area has become a zone of national insecurity, legitimising the deployment of armed forces to secure the border area. The result was the militarisation of the border region. A foreign national must obtain a restricted area permit from the designated state authorities to visit the state. Moreover, the nationals of Pakistan, Bangladesh, China, Myanmar and Nigeria are required to seek prior approval of the country's Ministry of Home Affairs. Further, the protected area permit is required for both domestic and foreign visitors to visit several places in the state, including Nathula Pass (Tourism and Civil Aviation Department 2018). As a result, the Himalayan borderland is undergoing a process of systematic dismantling of century-old practices of trade, cultural and economic flows. Today, orthodox military thinking dominates the border region (Lama 2016, 40). The result is that the Himalayan borderland is a highly restricted area. The result of such thinking is also reflected in the economic activities and trade through Nathula Pass

because national security interests cannot be detached from economic development.

Table 9.4 List of tradable items from India exportable to China

S.No	Items	S.No	Items	S.No	
1.	Agriculture implements	15.	Tobacco	29.	Hardware
2.	Blankets	16.	Snuff		
3.	Copper products	17.	Shoes		
4.	Clothes	18.	Kerosene oil		
5.	Coffee	19.	Stationery		
6.	Tea	20.	Spices		
7.	Barley	21.	Utensil		
8.	Rice	22.	Wheat		
9.	Flour	23.	Liquor		
10.	Dry fruits	24.	Milk processed products		
11.	Vegetable oil	25.	Canned foods		
12.	Dry and fresh vegetables	26.	Cigarettes		
13.	Cycles	27.	Local herb		
14.	Gur and misri	28.	Palm oil		

Source: Government of Sikkim (2007, 136–149)

Table 9.5 List of tradable items that are importable from China to India

S.No	Items	S.No	Items	S.No	Items
1.	Goat skin	8.	Borax	15.	Sheep
2.	Sheep skin	9.	Seaibelyipe		
3.	Wool	10.	Butter		
4.	Raw silk	11.	Goat Kashmiri		
5.	Yak tail	12.	Common salt		
6.	China clay	13.	Horse		
7.	Yak hair	14.	Goat		

Source: Government of Sikkim (2007, 136–149)

Today, when one looks at the initial euphoria of Nathula Pass and the promises it brought, they seem to be far remote from reality. The trade at Nathula Pass is moving at a snail's pace, though its potential has not been fully tapped. One of the main reasons has to do with the number of tradable items. The main items which can be traded through Nathula Pass are being

regulated and monitored by the government. Table 9.4 shows the list of items.

Many argue that the items mentioned in the above two tables are outdated and need to be reviewed in order to increase border trade. New items should be added to increase the volume of trade. The Indian government has its own reasons for imposing restrictions on tradable items. The restriction is primarily imposed because of the growing anxiety that the Indian market, especially in the Northeastern state, would be flooded by cheap Chinese goods.

The number of permitted items to be traded was revised in 2012 as desired by the trading communities on both sides. In India, the traders can import readymade garments, shoes, quilts/blankets, carpets and local herbal medicines from Tibetan Autonomous Region. Similarly, the revised list allowed the traders from Sikkim to export more items like processed food, flowers, fruits, spices, and religious products like beads, prayer wheels, incense sticks and butter oil lamps.

In fact, the opening up of Nathula Pass constitutes an element of the confidence-building measures and is not much intended for large-scale trade. The volume of trade reached Rs 82.68 crores, which is very minimal, and in 2017, the total trade decreased substantially under the larger ambit of the Doklam crisis.[6] Between May and September of 2017, the bilateral trade at Nathula Pass took place only for 11 days due to the Doklam standoff, as compared to at least 16 days a month during the normal period *(Sikkim Express*, November 29, 2017).[7] The traders on the Indian side are mostly the local people. As such, when the trade is affected, it is the local people who have suffered the most.

Table 9.6 Total trade at Nathula Pass (Rs. in Crores)

S.No	Year	Export	Import	Total trade
1	2006	0.09	0.11	0.2
2	2007	0.28	0.07	0.35
3	2008	0.95	0.013	0.95
4	2009	1.35	0.029	1.38
5	2010	4.02	0	4.02
6	2011	3.72	0	3.72
7	2012	5.99	1.01	7
8	2013	7.75	1.17	8.92
9	2014	16.04	12.36	28.40
10	2015	60.25	11.04	71.30
11	2016	63.38	19.30	82.68
12	2017	2.83	0.70	3.84

Source: Press Information Bureau (2014)

Even a decade after the opening up of Nathula Pass, the trade and modus operandi remains the same as it was in 2006. Therefore, Sikkim needs to look for new avenues to market its products and also attract tourism and investment. This can be facilitated through the Act East policy, whereby the Indian government have stressed the development of the Northeastern states. But there is not much enthusiasm in Sikkim about the policy. There is an absence of official document from the state government advocating about the policy. Assam has created a new department for Act East Policy Affairs. Such initiatives have been absent in Sikkim. Therefore, the Act East policy has not come to a stage to attract the attention of the policy-planners of the state.

Conclusion and policy recommendations

The ongoing Sino-Indian rivalry and territorial contestations in the Himalayas within the larger orthodox security paradigm inform the policies in the Himalayan borderland, and as such, Nathula Pass has suffered from this enigma of the security dilemma. The border trade through Nathula Pass is still minimal, even a decade after its opening, and the people-people contact is heavily restricted. Only a handful of Indian citizens are allowed to go to Mansarovar Yatra through Sikkim, and the Chinese citizens are barred from travelling to Sikkim. The military-centric focus of the border

region has bypassed the advantaged offered by Nathula Pass into a region of insecurity where there is a threat of Tibetan refugees and cheap Chinese goods flooding into the Indian market.

The security dilemma has a larger implication for Sikkim, as it lies in the heart of the Himalayan borderland. The cross-border interaction through Nathula Pass remains unclear. Therefore, Sikkim needs to look for new shores. The Act East policy can be one of those facilitators for Sikkim's growth. The state can benefit through trade, tourism and the market of Northeast India and larger Southeast Asian countries. The Southeast Asian countries can be developed into markets for Sikkim's organic products. Sikkim can be developed into a possible tourist hot spot for Southeast Asian countries. This can be done by facilitating the Buddhist Circuits, targeting the Buddhist populations inhabiting Southeast Asian countries.

The challenges include transport and connectivity in Sikkim, which needs to be improved. For a landlocked place like Sikkim, connectivity figures as the main hurdle to any developmental initiatives or policy formulations. Sikkim today is connected by only one national highway to the rest of the country. Moreover, the long spell of monsoon rains in the summers and cold weather in the winter restricts the smooth initiation and implementation of infrastructure development. The frequent landslides add to the already significant number of problems. Thus, the state needs to boost the development of connectivity within the state and with the outside. The railway line connecting Sikkim, which has been delayed due to a number of reasons, should be revived and completed. The opening up of Pakyong Airport can be seen as the first step of connecting Sikkim and fostering the possibility of opening the state through its southern borders.

Notes

1 The McMahon Line is a boundary line between the Tibetan Autonomous Region of China and the Northeast region of India. It was proposed by a British Indian Army officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Sir Vincent Arthur Henry McMahon, at the 1914 Simla Convention. Although it serves as a boundary line between China and India, its legal status is being contested by both sides.

2 The year of invasion and the duration of Bhutan's stay at Rabdentse Palace are debatable. For example, Risley (1894) puts the duration of Bhutan's occupation at five to six years.

3 Channgu has been spelt as 'Tsomgo' at times.

4 The other two passes are Shipki La in Himachal Pradesh and Lipu Lekh in Uttrakhand.

5 See ‘Statistics of Tourist Arrival in the State of Sikkim’, available at the official website of Sikkim Tourism.

6 The local inhabitants of Sikkim are either least-bothered or not upset by the Doklam standoff between India and China. The Sikkim-Tibet border is a heavily militarised area which severely restricted movement along the border. During the Doklam standoff, the local people were more concerned about the Gorkhaland movement in the neighbouring Darjeeling hills. This was precisely because the Doklam crisis did not affect their daily lives (with the exception of the traders at Nathula) as much as the Gorkhaland movement did.

7 Please see Sikkim Express, ‘Low key Nathu La border trade towards closure on Thursday’, *Sikkim Express*, November 29, 2017.

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10 The Act East policy and Upper Assam

The Ledo/Stilwell Road perspective *Kaustubh Deka* There is this rather impressive signboard in a park called ‘Stilwell Park’ in the sleepy town of Ledo in Upper Assam.[1] The signboard is supposed to be a kind of benchmark ‘to set the perspectives right’ as it details the road distance from that spot onwards to a host of major South Asian cities/trading points. And thus, you have scores of people coming down on weekends, posing in front of that colourful signpost in hordes, taking group photos and selfies. Their faces glow with some expectations, a newfound connection to a world of possibilities, perhaps even a sense of belonging to a wider theatre of history. That signboard was erected in the year 1998, and it carried these lines: ‘To rejuvenate our lifeline. Revitalise our relationship. Reach out beyond the borders.’ Over the years it has weathered change of seasons, and its colour has faded along with that of people’s enthusiasm for it. Now, with the completion of the longest river bridge of India in its vicinity (Dr

Bhupen Hazarika Setu or Dhola Sadiya bridge), popular attention has almost completely shifted there. There too, however, is a story of crossing over. The new bridge brings Assam closer to Arunachal Pradesh, and by extension, Assam and the rest of India come closer to the Eastern frontier, i.e. China. This proximity to the East and its repercussions and prospects has been a factor both in policy prescriptions and popular imaginations.[2]

The Look East policy, inaugurated in the post-liberalisation era of 1991, reflected at its core a strategic shift in India's vision of the world and India's place in the evolving global economy, but also, equally importantly, a commitment and vision to make India's Northeast region a trading and commercial hub of Southeast Asia. The question is this: in the vision of the Act East policy, do the 'frontiers' become the new headquarters of change or continue to be mere buffer zones of trade and security interests? It is in the context of this important question that this chapter proposes a study of the historic Ledo Road (Stilwell Road) in order to ascertain the prospects and potentials of the Upper Assam and its borderland areas in the meta-policy narratives of the Act East policy.

The road in perspective: an enduring passage of history

'Ledo Road' had been the locally more prevalent name of what came to be known post-World War II (1939–45) as the 'Stilwell Road', the town of

Ledo in Upper Assam being the starting point of the road from the Indian side. With the commencement of World War II, the region found itself at the very heart of geopolitical theatre. The road in its present form was constructed during the war period, and was meant to be used as an alternative route to the Burma Road of the Western Allies. It was then that the Ledo road was officially named the Stilwell Road, after General Joseph Stilwell of the US Army, who was in charge of its construction. Although part of the route has been historically used for trans-regional movement of people between Assam and Myanmar, in its 'modern' form, the road was expected to be a strategic military route connecting Assam with Kunming, the capital of Yunnan province of China, through Northern Myanmar. With the ending of the war, followed by the post-colonial geopolitical realignment of the region, the road became a vulnerable thread in the new security narratives emerging amongst the nations and was subsequently closed down. Steps like the formation of the Kunming Initiative or Bangladesh, China, India and Myanmar (BCIM), a sub-regional forum established in 1999, began advocating the reopening of the route. The significance of the reopening of the road was emphasised as part of the endeavours to bring socio-economic development in the region by facilitating connectivity, trade and investment, and most importantly rejuvenating the once vibrant people-to-people contact amongst these areas (Pattanaik 2016). What needs to be stressed here, however, is that the road has also been, at least partly, a major preferred route of migratory waves from across the Southeast Asian continent. The road and the surrounding borderland areas remains a major artery of nostalgia, historical bondage and goodwill for people living across both sides of the borders. Despite persistent advocacy by various stakeholders to repair and reopen the road as part of growing regional cooperation, the unfolding fate of this historic and strategic channel remains ambiguous. This puzzle or complexity reflects some core aspects of the rapidly expanding doctrine of Act East policy itself. The next section takes them up.

From Look East to Act East: the context and the phases of evolution

In the early1990s, India launched the Look East policy as it sought to elevate the importance of Southeast Asia in India's foreign policy agenda. In doing so, India sought to complement the country's longstanding historical, cultural and ideological links with the region with growing economic interdependence, multilateral cooperation and cooperative security dialogues. In other words, what distinguishes India's post-Cold War re-engagement with Southeast Asia from the previous period of engagement was the fact that it started operating on multiple fronts, fuelled by the liberalisation of India's economy and emergence of sharedstrategic interests between India and Southeast Asia. The essence of it was captured in 2003 by the former Indian External Affairs Minister, Yashwant Sinha, in a speech:

> In the past, India's engagement with much of Asia, including Southeast and East Asia, was built on an idealistic conception of Asian brotherhood, based on shared experiences of colonialism and of cultural ties. The rhythm of the region today is determined, however, as much by trade, investment and production as by history and culture. This is what motivates our decade-old Look East policy.[3]

As mentioned earlier, the Look East policy was initiated in the early 1990s during the P.V. Narasimha Rao-led Congress government, and the policy went through further endorsements by the subsequent governments under Prime Ministers Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Manmohan Singh. A little less than three decades later, Prime Minister Narendra Modi officially announced the shift of nomenclature from 'Look East' to 'Act East', when in his address to the East Asia Summit held in Myanmar in 2014 he declared his government's 'great sense of priority and speed to turn our Look East policy into Act East policy'.[4]

The first phase of the Look East policy was ASEAN-centred and focused primarily on trade and investment linkages. The prevalent view was that the policy was rooted in economic compulsions, while the strategic dimensions of the policy only gained relevance during its so-called second phase in the 2000s, coinciding with the accelerated pace of India's accession to regional norms of interaction, conclusion of free-trade agreements, membership to regional forums and participation in multilateral security initiatives. More recently, India has become more assertive in voicing its concerns regarding China's rise as it has developed a more confident foreign policy, particularly under the present third phase of the Look East policy, which has

been relabelled the Act East policy. In the new phase, the policy seeks to be more comprehensive and ambitious because of the adoption of ‘extended neighbourhood’ theory, as the policy includes not only ASEAN but also Northeast Asia, apart from Australia, New Zealand, China, Japan and South Korea. The new phase also marks a shift from trade to wider economic and security issues, including joint efforts to protect the sea lanes and coordinate counter-terrorism activities. Defence considerations do play a role here. As defence analyst C. Raja Mohan put it candidly, ‘India’s defence contacts have widened to include Japan, South Korea and China. Never before has India engaged in such multi-directional defence diplomacy in Asia’.[5] This resulted in significant road and connectivity diplomacy. The ongoing trilateral highway project involving Myanmar and Thailand and the proposed rail link between New Delhi and Hanoi can be cited as two significant examples of India’s proactive initiatives at building transport corridors inter-connecting the region. Endeavours of these kinds to increase the cross-border linkages have also seen increasing participation from several private agencies. Right from the growth of the cultural festival phenomena to the growing frequency of bilateral talks, academic conferences and so on at the national and state level, there is a gradual growth of something that can perhaps be called as an ‘Act East enterprise’.

The Northeast in the Act East policy

It is important to highlight the fact that the region today one calls Northeast India is not unfamiliar to global trade, historically speaking. Significant parts of it had been connected to one or the other ancient ‘silk routes’ of trade (Verghese 2001). In more recent history, through the introduction of tea plantations, the British introduced the region to the world economy. Subsequently, the colonial project opened up the region through the construction of various roads linking Bengal and the Northeast region, as well as roads connecting various towns within the region. It was in a way the region’s first experience of a modern global trade regime (Barua 2017). In the post-independence phase, the official rationale behind linking Northeastern states with the policy has been primarily driven by the need to accelerate development activities of these states and their geographical

location. The Government of India wanted the Northeastern states to be the major gateway for trade and other economic activities with Southeast Asia and other neighbouring countries. Several measures have been undertaken under the aegis of the Look East policy to uplift Northeast India such as the Asian Highway, Asian Railway link and Natural Gas Pipeline. The Tokyo Declaration for India-Japan Special Strategic and Global Partnership made in Tokyo in September 2014 has brought Japan into the heart of the policy. In addition, India has joined several sub-regional groupings such as the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), Mekong Ganga Cooperation (MGC) Project and Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Regional Economic Forum (BCIM Forum).

The theatre stage of 'the New Great Game of the East'?

The era of ‘the New Great Game’ played out in Central Asia between China and India has been a key influence on most of the geopolitical development in South and Southeast Asia. Globalisation has not replaced regionalism, nor has geoeconomics replaced geopolitics. Political scientist David Scott points out three fields involved in the discourse of this New Great Game: military-security, economic and diplomatic (Scott 2008). Placed in this context, one sees the need for a judicious balance of these three as a must for the pragmatic execution of the Look East policy. The China factor has always been present from the early stages of the policy. In some ways, the rise of China is considered one of the most crucial developments that underpinned the Look East policy. In this context, some scholars attributed India’s engagement with Southeast Asia as a means to counter-balance China’s encroachment into India’s self-perceived sphere of influence in South Asia. Finally, as China began to demonstrate more assertive behaviour, both towards Southeast Asia and in the Sino-Indian relationship, discourses of the policy began to demonstrate a more emphatic position on the need to protect India’s expanding interests in Southeast Asia, as well as ensuring the freedom of navigation along vital sea-lines of communication.

This coincides with a growing proclivity by Indian strategic elites to equate India's interests in the South China Sea with China's growing presence in the Indian Ocean, which has come amid the emergence of the Indo-Pacific as a new geopolitical space (Ghosal 2013). The question then is, how do the concerns of these 'meta' narratives negotiate with the 'micro' concerns of the people of the region involved? We turn to China's position on the Stilwell Road later.

Possibilities, cautions and hindrances in turning the frontiers into headquarters

Some of the major apprehensions in the region regarding the Act East policy measures are that different projects under the policy would lead to large-scale immigration, exploitation of natural resources, human trafficking and militarisation. First and the foremost, one of the major challenges relate to the poor state of physical connectivity. Most infrastructure development is either taking place slowly or not taking place at all. Besides, there is the presence of multiple lesstangible but nevertheless real boundaries that crisscross the region – fiscal, legal, liquor, and emotional borders: 'borders, which do not usually appear on maps, are also underpinned by a similar "border-logic" of dividing a relating territories and peoples' (Tunyi and Wouters 2016). There is also a lack of reliable information about the potential opportunities of the region in Southeast Asia and other neighbouring countries. The Northeastern states could not attract potential investors. As a result, in spite of sharing a common border with Myanmar, Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh, the region has not been able to get the relevant benefits. In fact, there is a high possibility of the policy bypassing the region. We need to assess the varying needs and priorities of each state within the region. There is a need to assess the export potential of each state to their immediate neighbours. On the potential side of the region, tourism is an area which can be accorded priority due to topography, pleasant climate and natural flora and fauna. One can give the example of initiatives to develop innovative areas like 'tea tourism', whereby the richness and the varieties of high-quality tea that a

region like Upper Assam produces can make a stronger presence in fast-expanding Southeast Asian markets. As part of it, a ‘Tea Museum’ under the joint initiative between the Assam Tourism Development Corporation (ATDC) and the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (Intach) is being set up at Dibrugarh, Assam.[6]

Economist Alokesh Barua (Barua 2017) points out the two distinct ways that the regional trade agreements through the Act East initiatives could possibly help the development process in the Northeast: first, they can help integrate the Northeast markets with the booming markets of Southeast and East Asia through trade, which could boost the process of industrialisation in the Northeast via the realisation of economies of scale in an enlarged market. Second, the Northeast can serve as the entrepot for the entire Indian hinterland export to Southeast and East Asian markets due to its advantageous locational proximity to these markets. However, Barua is quick to point out, drawing from the various viewpoints expressed in one of the pioneering forum organised in 2005 by the Guwahati-based Centre for Northeast India, South and Southeast Asia Studies [CENISEAS] titled ‘Towards a New Asia: Transnationalism and Northeast India’, that historically India’s trade with East and Southeast Asia has been more maritime than continental – a reality that continues, and despite some developments, trade with Southeast Asia has remained easier and cheaper by sea rather than by land (ibid: 410–412). A report by the New Delhi-based Observer Research Foundation (ORF) emphasises the same when it points out that nearly 95 percent of India’s merchandise trade by volume (70 percent by value) continues to be moved by sea. The report points out the vital importance maritime routes and boundaries as ‘for the connectivity network to be completed the wide road network needs to be linked with the maritime routes to ensure seamless movement of cargo, trade and transportation’ (Datta 2017). However, in recognition of this need, it was reported that at the India annual meeting with the ASEAN Connectivity Coordinating Committee (ACCC) in 2013, India had suggested setting up a Joint Working Group (JWG) on Maritime Connectivity between India, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam (Planning Commission of India 2013).

Again, although lack of markets or smallness of the size of the market is often said to be a major constraint to the development of industries in the Northeast, the root cause of the backwardness of the region does not lie in

‘lack of integration’ with the larger markets of Asia. After all, the region is well-integrated with ‘mainland’ India, whose market size is many times larger than that of the entire South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and Myanmar combined (Barua 2017). The reason why the industry has not yet taken off in the region is not the lack of integration with the outside markets, but the lack of integration of the Northeast region itself. The various states of the region exist as disjointed blocks without having any meaningful integration among them. Professor Barua cautions us on a very important lesson from history. One has to keep in mind that exposure to international trade is not something entirely new for the region. The 19thcentury had seen this region engaging in flourishing trade with the Western world, but it did not help the region experience rapid economic development. This past failure may help us to assess or reassess how crucial the Act East initiatives can potentially be for the economic development of the region (ibid.). With these larger perspectives on the prospects and challenges to the Act East policy that seeks to transform the region, the chapter turns to the specific context of the Ledo Road region.

The resource, ruins, revivals matrix: understanding the Ledo Road borderlands

Borderlands are largely about dislocation and life in diminished spaces rendered precarious by sovereign state regimes. Yet they are homelands to many who continue to be shaped by this spatial reality, but also continue to make and unmake the connotation of this reality, through their spatialised social relations of everyday life. The Asian Borderland Research Network (ABRN) has come out with a three-point access to understand the phenomena of borderlands.[7] To paraphrase, these are resources (how the formation of borderlands is crucially linked to resource extraction), ruins (how the legacies of colonialism and past system of dominations impact the nature and strategy of identity-formation of borderland populations) and finally revivals (how some cultural practices are performed and preferred to stake claims on those identities at the borderland).

In this sense, the zone that we refer to as Northeast India today is largely a borderland, its story utterly incomplete without a reference to its international neighbourhood. It is a region created by the phenomenal event of Partition. It needs to be emphasised here that the Partition of British India into the two new sovereign entities of India and Pakistan had a tremendous and irrevocable impact on the very character and shape of the region that came to be recognised as Northeast India. It changed the cartographic, demographic and territorial realities of the region, leading to far-reaching adverse effects on its economic networks (Haokip 2012). Its new international borders disrupted long-established connections, both physical and man-made, and created new scales of association. The result was a configuration of contrary developments of homogenisation and divergence within the region, making regional generalisations hazardous.

In their article ‘Borderland Histories, Northeastern India: An Introduction’, Willem Van Schendel and Joy Pachuau talk of four reasons to treat Northeast India as a borderland. To quote the authors:

> First, in the colonial period, it was the eastern frontier of British India. Second, the region reached independence as the eastern periphery of post-colonial India. Third, it became conceptualized as a minimal zone between the areas of South Asia and Southeast Asia. Fourth, it is now a dynamic crossroads of geopolitical reconfiguration involving China, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Nepal and India.
>
> (Schendel and Pachuau 2016, 1)

Northeast India, in this vein, is increasingly being placed in an expanding paradigm where there is talk about the greater Northeast, the Bangladesh-Burma-Bhutan-Tibet-Yunnan region (Aung-Thwin 2008) and post-Partition academic and geographical territories (Schendel 2018).

The Patkai Pangsau borderlands: multi-layered complexities

In this chapter, I would draw attention to the regions in the Assam-Arunachal Pradesh-Burma (Myanmar) borderland that is connected

immediately by the historic Ledo or Stilwell Road, an area which I refer to as the Patkai Pangsau borderlands. Flanked by the Patkai mountain range, the mountain pass at Pangsau has been the historical migration corridor facilitating transit not offered in any other part of the long range of chains Southeast of Assam. Some prominent group of migrants of Tai ethnic stock who came through this route reconfigured their identity as they found a new homeland and a new name for themselves too: the Ahoms. However, there continued to be other tribes who have been migrating through this route at different points of time and settling down on both sides of the Patkai Pass, much before the post-colonial border regime set in. Some of the tribes now dotting the contiguous Indo-Myanmar borderland are the Khamtis, Singphos, Nocte, Wancho and various Tai-speaking groups. Way back in 1835, in his notes of the colonial expedition, Captain Pemberton records, ‘they speak the same language, observe the same customs, profess the same faith, as the Shans, who occupy the whole tract of country extending from the banks of the Ningthee to the banks of the Irrawatte river’ (Pemberton 1835).

The role of the state and its policies: the context of the Act East policy and the 'Great Game East'

As the grand policy of Act East seems set to sweep the region, one needs to assess how far the communicative life world of these regions will be conditioned by it. The Act East policy seems to represent a paradox typical to most of the Asian borderlands: a state-based policy perspective that has to negotiate with the complexities involving the envisioning of a transnational space. As a policy prescription, it entails the idea that the sub-national realities (export zones, growth regions and metropolises) need to meaningfully align with that of the supra-national potentials (free trade zones, growth triangles, unions of states, international organisations and alliances). As has been observed, the Asian borderlands are peripheral to the centres of state power, and yet they remain prime locations for the exercise of the very state authority that had alienated them in some other sense. This has manifested in an experience of dual connectivity for these borderlands,

where the borderland is getting involved not only in the process of linking their immediate spaces across the national borders, but becoming bridges connecting the 'mainlands' – political and economic – of the states that they 'belong to'.[8] This represents a paradox, as political scientist Samir Kumar Das puts it succinctly:

> The new geopolitical imagination triggered off by the Look East policy defines connection in terms of flow of goods and services and incorporation of South and Southeast Asian countries into a common market, while there are others who tend to define it as one established between peoples separated long back by the political imperative of administration and government. The asymmetry is too sharp to be bridged even in the long run.
>
> (Das 2010)

Thus, the Act East policy is bound to be the overarching context in which the cultural contact between borderland people unfolds in the Northeast. But how is this policy perceived on the ground by the borderland societies, and how is it likely to impact its cultural grammar?

A road trapped in geopolitics: manoeuvre to keep the Dragon out?

As per reports, if developed and renovated, the Ledo road can handle up to 20 percent of the current bilateral trade between India and China.[9] Given the geographical fact that the Chinese ports are away in the East, the land option is considered much better for tapping markets in Western and Southwestern China that has more than 30percent of China's population. The significance of it assumes a greater proportion given China's growing signals towards keenness of doing business through this road. A senior Editor with the *People's Daily*, the official mouthpiece of the Communist Party of China, Mr. Ding Gang, wrote:

> Considering that China is a more developed country than India and Myanmar, it should play a major role in the reconstruction work. All three countries should set up a joint dialogue mechanism, in which their concerns and problems can be put on the negotiating table, including

> how to make peace with ethnic insurgents, and the three countries can find out solutions together. China can be the initiator of the communication mechanism. The restoration of the Stilwell road will revitalize the promising path, which will interconnect Southwest China, South Asia and Southeast Asia, and merge the region into an emerging market. The ethnic groups living in this area can seize the chance and prosper.[10]

However, there is an increasingly growing feeling that the government of India is hesitant to reopen the Ledo road, thinking that it will put India in a disadvantageous position vis-a-vis China in the region. The place of Myanmar in India's policy concerns becomes most critical in this regard. A report by the New Delhibased Centre for Land Welfare Studies mentions three emerging trends in India's strategic interests in Myanmar. These three can be argued to have largely dictated India's response to the Ledo road issue as well. These are:

I. Coordinating effective counter-insurgency measures to drive out the Northeast insurgents hiding inside Myanmar;
II. Improving bilateral relations with Myanmar and ASEAN for energy security and economic development of its Northeast; and
III. Countering China's growing influence in Myanmar and India Ocean region (Kapoor 2018).

Also important here is the place of Japan in this discourse. The emergence of Japan as the 'most important partner' in the Act East policy discourse is often explained as Japan (being) 'a natural partner for India's Act East policy is not just dealing with China's rise but also in seeking to together mould larger Asian decision-making through norm-entrepreneurship and consensus building as basis for regional good governance' (Singh and Yamamoto 2016).

Present status of the road: Upper Assam recast

The argument continues that India's Act East policy should focus more on the historic Ledo/Stilwell Road. Some developments in the past years signal the potential reopening of the 1,726-km-long Stilwell road. Reportedly, China has already upgraded its portion of632km into a six-lane mountain

highway capable of handling industrial container traffic. Myanmar, which sits at a critical position from the connectivity point of view, having a major portion of the road (1,033 km) in its territory, has shown positive movements towards making the road functional once again. As per reports, the China-based Yunnan Construction Engineering Group and a Myanmarese company, the Yuzana Group, have agreed to jointly construct the stretch between the capital of Kachin state, Mytkina up to the Pangsau Pass at India-Myanmar border (Puyam 2015).

There are renewed arguments on restoring the importune of the Upper Assam region as the hub of renewable energy industries at this crucial meeting point where China is making gestures at connecting the One Road One Belt initiatives (OROB) to India's Act East policy initiatives, thus connecting the Belt Road Initiatives (BRI) region to the Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal (BBIN) region with Upper Assam as the connecting artery. The government of Arunachal Pradesh has been proposing the revival and activating of the Nampong (the nearest town to Pangsau Pass from Indian side) for which a Land Customs Station had already been approved by the Government of India. According to the official report, the volume of informal trade activities in Pangsu Pass has increased manifold after the conversion of the erstwhile Stilwell road into a national highway (National Highway 153). In December 2015, for the first time ever since the 1962 border dispute, three Chinese vehicles crossed over the border trade point of Nampong on the Pangsau Pass into Changlang district of Arunachal Pradesh, taking the road from Baoshan in China's Yunnan province. The vehicles carried items for participation at the 3rd Assam International Agri-Horti Show 2016 in Guwahati. An Arunachal Pradesh official called it 'a ray of hope for a better future for business in the state'. The move became particularly significant as the land route at Nampong (through the Stilwell road) was approved by the Indian Customs Commissionerate amongst all the options, thus raising the pertinent question of whether India was responding to Chinese gestures and testing the ground before opening a new land trade route with China.[11] Since 2007, every January the Government of Arunachal Pradesh has been organising the Pangsau Pass Winter Festival at Nampong, the 'last town' in India at the India-Myanmar border. Projected as an initiative to showcase the 'unique' culture and diversity of the area and to promote cross-border connections part, not all quarters are happy at such initiatives. A flashpoint came in 2017 when 'insurgent groups'

operative in the area attacked tourist vehicles going into the festival, followed by gun battle with and killing of Indian security forces. Despite this, state governments in the region continue to push for the opening up of the borders and strengthening of cross-border cultural bondages. One of the demands put forth by the government of Arunachal Pradesh, in the first meeting held of the newly constituted 'NITI Forum for Northeast' in June 2018, was the demand to open road access to Buddhist pilgrimage from Myanmar and Thailand to visit the Buddhist holy sites in Arunachal Pradesh and Upper Assam (North Eastern Council Secretariat 2018). This author has encountered monks studying in various Buddhist monasteries in places like Namsai in Arunachal Pradesh who are 'recent' entrants from the adjacent Tibetan autonomous region of China, as well as various parts of Myanmar. For these people and places, negotiation over the Ledo road is of critical significance. However, the course of this negotiation involving the 'fate' of this one road, involving many countries with contiguous but diverse political-ecological realities, is still being figured out.

Dynamics of identities and social boundaries in Patkai borderland

Stuart Hall talks about cultural identity both as a matter of 'becoming' as well as 'being' (Hall 1992). Philip Schlesinger adds to this the significance of boundaries for analysing collective identity formation: 'The critical factor for defining the ethnic group, therefore, becomes the social boundary which defines the group with respect to other groups of the same order, not the cultural reality within those borders' (Schlesinger 1991). While studying borderland cultural personae, we should be aware of the dynamics that make and unmake these cultural identities as well as social boundaries. Here, one can point to three important nodes of operation: trade potentials (both formal and informal), the phenomena of cross-border insurgency and the attendant security regime and transnational challenges such as drug trafficking, and the spread of diseases and migration. A complex combination of all three, especially given the larger backdrop of the Act East policy delineated previously, continues to mould the identity dynamics

in this borderland, especially the nature of interactions of people across the borders (Jacob 2010). As more security patrolling and presence of insurgents have made the borders inaccessible, as a paradoxical consequence, there have been attempts to preserve the cultural and linguistic heritage by the people and the closed borders make them feel isolated from their culture, 'so they preserve all they have left'.[12] One must remember that ethnic groups in these regions have often mobilised political recognition to varying degrees based on exclusive cultural identities rooted in specific geographical areas. In this expanding landscape of competing claims of rights and recognitions, emphasis on ethnic purity has become an important political and moral marker to claim territorial rights, an intensive cosmology of belonging. Meenaxi Barkataki, in her ethnographic account of the Tangsa tribe, raises this question of identity as a border-induced performance (Barkataki 2017). How do state policies and political borders – inter-state as well as international – impact a community's need to perform their ethnicity? The Tangsa and many other smaller tribes might choose to identify or not identify with their trans-border cousins, depending on the policy incentives and the political regime created by the borders.

A case study was done by Gorky Chakraborty and Asok K. Ray along the Mizoram-Myanmar border; (Chakraborty and Ray 2014) throws up some points which are largely appropriate for the Patkai borderlands, too, and corroborate with my initial observations on this region: *Gap in understanding of space*: The state focuses on the cartographic boundaries, while people believe in the pre-existing clan boundaries. Here, the issue of intersection between environment and ethnic politics becomes extremely significant too.

Chasm between container and petty trade on the border: The perception of petty trade on the border is ideational as well as of mutual commodity exchange. This is deemed incompatible with the international container trade promoted by the state. But this also means 'an imagination of new market models, kinship or more accurately cross-kinship networks and social connections that have the potential of transcending the homelands of diverse groups and communities—already dismembered and kept apart by the existing administrative divisions' (ibid.).

There is a new body of scholarship that attempts to critically understand instances of interactions and friendships between people in Northeast India and those in South, Southeast and East Asia as it talks about the importance

of looking ‘beyond the focus on the “here and now” and probe “histories of friendship” and of “expansive personhood” beyond the present lacuna of the postcolonial mentality’ (Saikia and Baishya 2017). Their gaze thus is on the unfolding of everyday life at the border, which they place in the context of lingering bondages, of ‘older forms of connections that refuse to disappear despite the hardening of national boundaries and its attendant politics of forgetting and remembering’ (ibid: 9). The Patkai Pangsau borderland, this chapter argues, presents a suitable site to understand phenomena like these, to grasp a particular unfolding of ‘the horizons of history and memories to include the past in the present, South with Southeast Asia’ (Saikia 2005).

The borderland and its cultural connotations are dynamic. The span and meaning of it, the very notion of what it means to inhabit a borderland, has been changing over time and with each successive generation. With the opportunities offered by urban India and the increasing thrust of aspiration and mobility, the young people from these borderlands are turning their gaze more and more inwards, towards the *centre* and not the other way. There are studies and talks about this growing exodus from the *periphery* to the *centre* (McDuie-Ra 2012; Haksar 2016; Hazarika 2018). This critical factor of changing aspirations and norms need to be factored in alongside the point of ‘rediscovering of one’s roots’ while we discuss the phenomena of cultural ties across borders. There are cases of students belonging to tribes like Tangsa and Wangsu studying in educational institutes of Upper Assam, while some of their family members continue to reside on the ‘other’ side of the border in Myanmar. For these students, ‘aspiration’ drives them ‘Westward’ into India, while India is talking about moving ‘Eastward’. Thus, once (re) opened, the historic Ledo ‘Stilwell’ Road will impact different groups differently. The impact on students and small business people will be potentially different than the implications for big business houses. As mentioned earlier, some of the prominent tribes living at this borderland and the ones living across/separated by the border are tribes like Tangsa (Thangsa), Nocte, Singhpo (Jingpo), Wangcho and Khamtis. Their areas of habitation are the states of Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland in Northeast India and the Sagaing and Kachin provinces of Western Myanmar. A joint study by the North Eastern Social Research Centre, Guwahati and Animation and Research Centre, Yangon, Myanmar, that looked at the situation of 11 communities in Western Myanmar and

seven tribes in Northeast India separated by the international border, confirms that ‘there is constant movement between the borders, and also intermarriage between the tribes living in Myanmar and Arunachal Pradesh’ (Fernandes et al 2015). It further notes, ‘the fact of being separated by an international boundary has implications for their economy, identity and culture. These tribes maintain social and trade relations but would like to better express their unity through a sense of belonging to the same community. They also face some tensions and would like to find ways of getting over them and improving their human and commercial relations’ (ibid.). Thus, despite the border regime, the commonalities of tribal identity thrive as the factor binding people as ‘one tribe’, although separated by the international border into different nation-states. The government needs to weigh both the micro and macro dimensions in the momentous decision to make or not to make the road functional for people at large.

Conclusion: revitalising connections

To become the gateway of growing trade relations between India and Southeast Asia, the abundant availability of natural resources in Northeast India needs to be optimally as well as responsibly explored. The region is seen as a poorly performing economic zone beset with a spell of prolonged political instability. These are the urgent challenges to be confronted for the region to achieve the primary goals of peace, security and sustainable development, enabling it to gradually become a strong geo-economic player.

There needs to be a sincere effort to develop and involve the region before one pushes further East, else the Northeast will remain just a corridor or perhaps a superhighway at best. People of the region have to be made active stakeholders of any growth plans initiated by the Act East policy. The present Modi government with a strong mandate has the opportunity to take the state governments into confidence. It all can be lost if the return of the one-party dominance system[13] into Indian politics means a shrinking space for greater federal decentralisation. One hopes that the often-extolled parallels between Yunnan in China and Northeast India will stop at their role as connecting dots of the Ledo-Stilwell Road (these two regions, after

all, being connected through the ancient silk route once). One does not seek a ‘Yunnanisation’ of Northeast India, which would effectively mean the region turning into a mere tourism museum showcasing ‘exotic ethnic diversities and uniqueness’, as observers point out has been done to the ‘ethnically distinct’ Yunnan region in China (Hillman 2003). The Act East policy, if it is to ‘Act East’ as a real game-changer for the region, has to bring the region to the centre-stage of the discourse, as headquarters of activities and no longer as the margin of the discourse.

The story of the Ledo ‘Stilwell’ Road and its eventual adaptation into the multilayered policy discourse will be a statement on the unfolding course of the Act East policy discourse itself, reflecting which amongst the multiple axes of the discourse – i.e. geo-strategic, geo-economics, ‘cultural-civilizational’ – will prevail over the others in the long run. As the transformation from ‘Look East’ to ‘Act East’ has been considered not as a simple upgrading but an act of enhancement of India’s diplomatic footwork across East and Southeast Asia (Rajendram 2014), one would hope for a comprehensive and nuanced understanding when it comes to deliberations like that of opening up of the transnational and historic Ledo ‘Stilwell’ Road.

Postscript

As Chou En Lai Buragohain, a man in his late 60s, sits in his ancestral house in Upper Assam, he often regrets not realising the importance of taking enough care of his father’s diaries and notebooks, which he thinks have resulted in ‘significant loss of history and identity’.[14] Ethnographic explorations are extremely scarce on the life and times of the people like his father Purnokanto Buragohain (1890-1959), entrepreneurial pioneers in the *eastward* approach to business and enterprise under the *empire*, trying to connect the emerging business hubs like Yangon and Yunnan to trade potentials of colonial Assam. What was the ‘perceived and felt’ identity of people like Buragohain in 20th-century Burma (Myanmar) and China? ‘Patkair Xipare No Bosor’ (‘Nine years on the other side of the Patkai’) by Purnokanto Buragohain, first published in 1950s (now translated into English, see Sarma and Sahoo 2016), suggests significant continuities of

cultural ethos and worldview across these spaces once connected with a shared past but increasingly being separated by emergent colonial boundaries. There is a growing urge to ‘go beyond the Patkai’ once more by the new generation of Buragohains.

The once existing corridors of (fairly recent) history which gradually turned into frontiers, and then into boundaries, nevertheless retains its soft footprints. When India is looking and acting East, where is it gazing from? Most people in the Northeast region have been already gazing at the East. They have been and they are the East. It is time the significance of this is underscored.

Notes

1 Upper Assam refers to an administrative division of Assam with a historical character that draws both from the colonial and pre-colonial past. Located along the upper reaches of the Brahmaputra valley, the division is composed of formerly undivided Lakhimpur and Sivasagar districts and entails nine districts at present. The area assumed historical importance first as an early seat of waves of inbound migration from the East, resulting in a few powerful kingdoms, including the powerful Ahom kingdom. Later, the region turned into one of the important eastern-most frontier outposts of the British India empire, becoming an industrial and military hub with ‘discovery’ of oil, tea and coal and the presence of timber. Due to its locational importance and resource capacity, the region also became a critical zone in the events of the Second World War.

2 There is a widely held view in Assam that the Dhola Sadiya bridge was completed in ‘record’ time, as it was seen as crucial from the defence and security point of view. Compared to that, other bridge projects, even though lesser in magnitude, like the Bogibeel bridge project, are seen to be languishing, taking a substantially longer time to be completed.

3 Sultan Shahin, ‘India’s Look East policy pays off’, *Asia Times*, October 11, 2003.

4 For more clarity, please see ‘Look East’ policy now turned into “Act East” policy: Modi’, *The Hindu*, November 13, 2014.

5 C. Raja Mohan, ‘Look East policy: Phase two’, *The Hindu*, October 9, 2003.

6 Pankaj Sarma, ‘Museum to unveil romance of heady brew’, *The Telegraph*, December 16, 2014.

7 Please see Asian Borderlands Research Networks. Retrieved from https://asianborderlands.net/.

8 Please refer to the 6th Conference of the Asian Borderlands Research Network, held at American University of Central Asia, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan on 13-15 August 2018. The title of the conference was ‘Borderland Spaces: Ruins, Revival(s) and Resources’.

9 Subir Bhaumik, ‘India and China can bond along the Stilwell Road’, *The Economic Times*, October 17, 2013.

10 Ding Gang, ‘Stilwell’s old road offers chance to revitalize trade’, *Global Times*, June 16, 2016.

11 Sangeeta Barooah Pisharoty, ‘Hope rises in Northeast as old China road springs to life, even if just for a day’, *The Wire*, January 17, 2016.

12 Mirza Zulfiqur Rahman, ‘Stilwell road: The abandoned route through India, Myanmar and China should be restored’, *scroll.in*, October 12, 2016.

13 The phrase ‘the one-party dominant system’ was originally coined by the noted political analyst Rajni Kothari to capture a phenomenon peculiar to electoral politics in India, and to the Congress party in particular. The consequences of the domination of the Congress and the lack of a viable opposition in Parliament as well as states in India seen to have led to a centralisation of power. See Kothari (1970).

14 Field interview by the author, Demow, July 2017.

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11 India's Act East policy

A response from the borderland *Nongthombam Jiten*
The process of imposing of new nations on old societies has left this border region (Northeast India and Northwest Myanmar) as a periphery and marginalised area. In this regard, a conceptualisation of Northeast India and Northwest Myanmar from the insider's point of view is essential for understanding its inhabitants and the forces of change to which they are exposed. The paper tries to show how 'us' and 'they' perceived the region between 'geography of knowing' and 'geography of ignorance'. It also highlights understanding the commonalities and complexities of this region against the backdrop of the emerging geopolitical situation. It further endeavours to highlight the paternalistic attitude of the Look/Act East policy and the imagination of the people of this region, with a view to shed light on how to bring peaceful coexistence amongst the people living in the study area.

Introduction

The modern historical experiences of the people of this borderland (Northeast India and Northwest Myanmar) attempt to respond to two major influences in history: firstly, the structural transformations in society and polity engendered by colonialism, and secondly, the security and economic development brought by post-colonial India. It is a well-known fact that the worldview of the original settlers of the borderland of India and Myanmar was not carefully taken into consideration while conceiving the Look/Act East policy of India and its subsequent opening of the ‘eastern gate’ through border trade at the Moreh-Tamu sector. This is how ‘we’ and ‘they’ have perceived the region, in line with the discourse of ‘geography of knowing’ and ‘geography of ignorance’. The ‘eastern gate’ was opened with a fault-line in the formulation of national policies and in the academic discourses of mainstream India.

Metaphorically, this borderland was earlier cornered as a ‘prisoner of geography’ by the Indian pundits. They, later, asserted that the opening of the ‘eastern gate’ would help in the liberation of the ‘prisoners of geography’. However, in reality, instead of liberating the prisoners, they only tried to make ‘a hole through the prison’ in order to give a safe passage to multinational companies and other corporate houses to conduct resource extractions and to wire the region in the name of national securitisation. Secondly, although the Northeast region of India (Northeast India) and Northwest Myanmar have geographical proximity and a shared way of life, ethnically and culturally the region is not a homogenous entity. Decisively, it is also necessary to look critically at the evolution of the heterogeneous character of the trans-border ethnic communities, and the result and activity of the border population in the political affairs of the state. Despite the apparent diversity, a feeling of oneness among the communities can also be seen. The paper attempts to underscore the commonalities and complexities of this region against the backdrop of the emerging geopolitical situation.

Eastern gate or security gate

In the lore of the people of the Indian state of Manipur, there is a belief that *Non-gpok Thong*, literally meaning ‘eastern gate’, will be opened someday to enhance the region’s ‘age-old hope’, believing that something would realistically change and would lead a prosperous and peaceful region. However, in the light of the Look/Act East policy, the hope turns into a fallacy to the people of Manipur. In the milieu of this policy, it would be interesting to understand how, why and for whom this policy has been formulated.

The Cold War and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union, globalisation and economic liberalisation brought radical shift in global geopolitics. As India started its economic liberalisation policy in 1991, a significant re-alignment in its relationship with the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) took place. This led to the launching of the Look East policy which accorded priority in the field of political and economic relationship with Southeast Asia and beyond. In the aftermath of Myanmar joining ASEAN in 1997, the relationship between India and Myanmar has significantly strengthened.

Broadly, the objective of India’s foreign policy towards the opening of the ‘eastern gate’ could be for many reasons in which the national interest is more prominent. Again, after the new government led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi came into power in 2014, the policy, though ‘primarily focused on trade and economics’, has been given ‘a distinct security dimension’.[1] Accordingly, the importance of Northeast India, particularly that of Manipur, becomes imperative in this new array, since it occupies the most strategic position and lies on the ‘cusp where South Asia becomes less and less South Asia and more and more Southeast Asia’ (Das 2010, 344).

Of late, Northeast India has been described as India’s gateway to Southeast Asia. However, the political elites continued to depict the region from a centralised perspective: this region as strife-torn, land-locked and underdeveloped, etc. Such stigmatisation as ‘potential hindrance’ (Duncan 2009), and defining the region as ‘sensitive’ with a suspicious eye from the security perspective, is yet to be transformed into social capital. Ironically, the policy never tries to accept the people and the region as assets and also an integral part of the nation, instead extending the attitude of suspicion driven by the national security.

On the other hand, in the global discourse on security, the most fundamental question that became prominent after the mid-1990s, when the

fearful scenes of communal and ethnic violence in the Balkans took place, is human security, since there is a kind of symbiotic relationship between the security of the people and the security of the state. The state cannot be secure unless the security of the people is assured (Helen James 2006). Contrarily, in the context of Northeast India, the ‘culture of impunity’ under special military laws is given to the security personnel in the name of national security[2].

Though the shift from the Look to Act East policy attempts a ‘more action-oriented policy, in contrast to previous government’s policy’ as expressed among the academia of mainland India, the change is only in the nomenclature in the case of this borderland. Rather, the move is a continuation of extending the securitisation at the border region and linking the rich resources of the region with the multinational companies, which comes at the cost of social inequality. Here, we can conclude that the policy is ultimately determined by security and geo-strategic interests.

This narrow perspective, driven by the hegemony of national security and corporatisation, has failed to explain the larger societal issues. Instead, it exposes discrimination in the name of development. This shows that ‘there is an intimate connection between the civilizational division of humankind into politico cultural stages and its hierarchical ordering into biologically determined races’ (Duffield 2007, 229) which ultimately makes the local people ‘strangers in their own land’. The model of development associated with the process of militarisation ultimately creates problems rather than solutions. There is a sharp divergence between the aspirations of the local people and the attitude and policies of the ruling class. As a result, the future of India-Myanmar relations, especially the Look/Act East policy, depends largely on how the Indian government perceives this borderland and its people – as assets or liabilities, or simply a passage to ASEAN markets or a dumping ground.

Identification of the region

Conceptualisation of Northeast India from the insiders’ point of view is a prerequisite for understanding its inhabitants and the forces of change to which they are exposed. The term ‘Northeast’ was initially conceptualised

by the British to identify a geographical area, and was considered an extended frontier of erstwhile Bengal province, inhabited by tribal people. Further, the area was transformed into a frontier zone of the British India empire by imposing several colonial legislations such as the Inner Line Permit, the Protected Area Permit and the Restricted Area Permit in order to expedite colonial rule. Besides, Lokendra Arambam (2001, 4) had opined in the line of Thongchai Winichakul (1996) that during the pre-colonial times, the independent kingdom of Manipur and its functioning were based on the 'organistic belief of one common body, like the human body'. Yet it has been divided as states of binary opposites of two different political antagonisms between hill and valley by the British colonialism, and the post-colonial Indian state has continued the empire's task. This territorial division engineered in the 19th century created a social, cultural and psychological divide in the minds of the people of the region, and has travelled down with time (Sharma 2011).

Interestingly, instead of challenging the notion of the region as a 'frontier' during the course of the anti-colonial struggle in the 20th century (Barbora 2006), the colonial legislations are preserved and imposed in the region by the post-colonial India, by declaring the region as a 'disturbed area'. This shows that 'Northeast India, had been even in British times and still earlier, largely cut off from the mainstream Indian psyche and never truly considered as part of Indian mainstream' (Jacob 2010, 2).

The current boundary dispute between India and Myanmar at Moreh-Tamu sector could be seen as how both governments neglected the peripheral area for the sake of their convenient diplomatic relationship. The Treaty of Yandabo, 1826, recognised Manipur as an independent kingdom, and the agreement to return the Kabaw valley to Burma at Sunynachil Ghat, on 9 January 1834, shaped the boundary between Myanmar and Manipur, which is known as the Pemberton Line. After the Anglo-Manipuri war of 1891, the Pemberton Line was re-demarcated in 1896 by Col. Maxwell, and thereafter came to be known as the Pemberton-Johnstone-Maxwell Line. Again, when Manipur was merged into India in 1949, the boundary was again redrawn by an agreement signed between India and Myanmar in 1967 in Rangoon (Yangon). In the agreement, the international boundary line is supposed to be demarcated according to the 'traditional boundary line'. Unfortunately, the survey for demarcation was done only from the Myanmarese side without having any responsible representative from

Manipur, as the power and function were within the ambit of the Indian government.

Since then, tension has gripped the border, and one of the border pillars (the Border Pillar 81) became the recent focal point of controversy. The people of Manipur wanted the India government to re-survey to identify the zero point of the ‘traditional boundary line’ of both the countries. On the contrary, the government declined to conduct the re-survey, stating that ‘(it) is in violation to the terms and conditions stated under the 1967 Agreement’. Ironically, the statement of the government is self-contradictory, since respecting the ‘traditional boundary line’ is a component part of that agreement. Further, India and Myanmar have decided to install ‘subsidiary pillars’ between the disputed boundary pillars without having any consultation with the local people. This again has ignited the rage of the people.

In July 2018, senior officials who visited the disputed area maintained that the border pillar (Border Pillar 81) is in the ‘right position’ based on the records of the Survey of India and the boundary agreement between India and Myanmar of 1967. The local inhabitants claimed that the border pillar (No. 81) has shifted. According to the agreement between the DC of Upper Chindwin district and Manipur Political Agent Captain Maxwell in 1896, the border pillar (no. 81) should be fixed 120 yards above the confluence of two streams: Namjetlok and Namufa. This contestation of the claims and counter-claims on a particular border pillar could be a vivid example of how the cartography of a nation is drawn without understanding the topography of the region and the people. There are areas which are yet to be resurveyed and demarcated at the boundary bordering Sagaing region and Manipur, which should be done jointly by the two countries. To the people of Manipur, the land is the collective symbol of their culture, identity, traditions and survival.

The debate on the fencing at Moreh-Tamu sector – whether it may be security fencing as the authorities talk about, or border fencing as the general masses talk about –is the fallout of the above facts. The question is, on which parameter or on whose cartographic scale is the ‘zero line’ of both the countries verified? Here lies the contestation between the concept of a natural boundary in our cultural context, and the mechanical boundary developed by the modern nation-states. This kind of inconvenience finally resulted in many confusions and blurred lines amongst the border people

about the distinction between ‘what is domestic’ and ‘what is foreign’ or ‘where does my society end and yours begin’ (Willem Van Schendel 2013, 268). It shows that the Northeast region is yet to be integrated in the India’s nation formation, as well as in the mainstream discourse on defining ‘who are we, the people of India?’

This unresolved dispute was further compounded while engaging in the land demarcation for the construction of an integrated check post (ICP) at Moreh, in which Myanmar strongly objected that the land belongs to them (this is in between Border Pillars no. 77 to 78). Since then, the construction has been suspended. Interestingly, the government of India, instead of challenging the objection and claims by Myanmar, shifted the construction for the integrated check post. It took more than one decade to complete the construction work, but in reality it is going to be a ‘solitary house’ at the border, since there is no dedicated road connectivity as of now, though a route map is drawn on paper which will take another decade or so. It could be mentioned that said integrated check post was approved in 2006 to expedite the connectivity and trade between India and Myanmar and beyond.

Again, scholars who are doing pioneering work on the study of borderlands (like Willem Van Schendel, James Scott, etc.) categorised the region lying between Northeast India and Northwest Myanmar differently from mainland India and Myanmar, and further included it in the *Zomia* discourse, a new nomenclature of the borderland areas, which aptly defines ‘an invisible transnational area with huge linguistic and religious diversity, sparsely populated, historically isolated and marginalized, politically dominated by surrounding states’ (Jean Machaud 2010, 187). However, this kind of categorisation has its limitation when we analyse the pre-colonial position of the states of Northeast India, particularly, Manipur. This scholarly constructed geographical re-alignment is an important area which needs a relook. From the historical point of view, the region once stood as cities and kingdoms. It was in this region that the interface between the civilisation of the region and Indian civilisation, along with the Chinese civilisation, took place. It was also this region that facilitated the ancient trade route linking Southeast Asia and beyond. In another historical context, the region also occupied a significant position during the Second World War. Contemporary historian of Myanmar, U-Thant Myint, in his illuminating book *The River of the Lost Footsteps* (2007, 46) re-defined this

region as ‘not just isolated tribes and obscure mountain chieftainship but cities and kingdoms with languages and cultures entirely distinct from the Chinese and Indian civilizations to the east and west.’

Because of this distinctive difference from the other two civilisations, it can be stated that Northeast India is not only the Northeastern borderland of South Asia, but it can be described as the northwestern borderland of Southeast Asia (Van Schendel 2002). In short, the region which was once the core of human civilisation has turned into the periphery in the academic discourses.

Grounded perspective

The conquest of Myanmar in three phases, and Manipur at one stroke, by the British in the 19th century created conditions for more or less similar transformation of the two pre-colonial cultures and polities in the geographic Northwest borderlands of Southeast Asia and Northeast India. In the words of Georges Balandier, ‘the country [Myanmar] was subjected to a double colonisation: that of the British and that of their many agents, brought in from India, who retarded the introduction into the country of modern administrative and economic methods’ (1970, 169). This kind of administrative divide into two divisions was also done in Northeast India, particularly Manipur, during the British rule.

The penetration of the capitalist economy into the traditional civilisation – leading to ruptures and destruction, relentless pursuit of profit and gain by ‘racial others’ in the exploitative networks of trade and commerce, and attitudes of social superiority by imperial agents over the inhabitant population – led to the rise of ethnic nationalism and self-determination movements in the colonial domains, which transformed the modern historical landscape of the Indo-Myanmar region. Tremendous ethnic dissidence in the post-independence Myanmarese polity after the departure of the imperial regime, the recurrence of force and brutality in the race for power, and the violence witnessed in the wake of the post-Second World War turmoil both in Myanmar and Manipur, all reflect certain common characteristics of erstwhile civilised societies relentlessly thrown into the cauldron of change and enforced modernity. Finally, the region turns into a

vortex for ethnic rivalries, contested imagined boundaries and resource domination. Since then, the region has become sensitive and volatile.

Post-colonial administrative and social engineering measures by the new nation-states of India and Myanmar did not attempt to understand the complex inheritance of the colonised cultures, but rather enhanced the exploitative, repressive structures and values of the imperial domain. This structural transformation in society and polity, and the attitude of social superiority driven by national security, lead to national liberation movements. In addition, the emergence of the region as a site of new interest for resource extraction and corporate sector-oriented trade under the guise of development, enhances environmental degradation and ultimately upsurges ethnic rivalries at the border region.

Ethnicity and identity

At present, Northeast India shares a total of 1,643km of land border with Kachin state, Sagaing region and Chin state, the longest international boundary with Myanmar that India has in the east. Again, the region has been created as one geographical entity with a perception that the region is ethnically and culturally homogeneous by the post-colonial Indian state. Yet it is characterised by different ethnic communities, speaking different languages and dialects with different cultures, customs, and economic quest with different political landscape.

While studying the trans-border area of the Indo-Myanmar region, another important area which needs critical re-examination is the blanket classification of tribes into different groups. At the grand level, we may easily conclude that due to the geographical proximity between Northeast India and the northwest borderland of Southeast Asia, the people of this region have some similarities in their way of life. But it would not be wrong to say that the blanket categorisation of the tribes of this region into Nagas, Kukis and Chins is an academic product of the colonial discourse. The heterogeneous character within these categories of tribes can be found when we look deeper into it. The generalisation of ethnic tribes as one homogeneous sect needs to be re-examined. It is certain that the term is not an *emic* name, but an *etic* name given by outsiders, later popularised and

enforced by the British authorities for their smooth and convenient administration (Naba-kumar 2009). This ethnic grouping is further compounded by the post-colonial nation-states following the legacy of the colonial masters. The situation is further aggravated by ethnic political actors.

At the same time, those people living on both sides of the border manage to outplay each other on the basis of their sheer size in number, and retain their ethnic majority status in the present-day democratic political system wherein number plays a vital role. Ultimately, ethnic conflict becomes ritualised during political elections and power distribution. Again, some are trying to earn profit in collaboration with powerful forces by exploiting rich mineral and other resources. Furthermore, they are becoming more of an agent and acting as private bodyguards for these powerful forces who have business interests in the mineral and other natural resources of this region. In order to expedite these neoliberal forces, some tribal groups demanded an ‘alternative arrangement’ and some other tribal demands for ‘exclusive territories’. Moreover, a tribal middle class could emerge, while the ordinary tribal population leads a miserable life at the cost of these forces. Consequently, this could hamper the peaceful coexistence of the different communities of this region.

Furthermore, nationality movements as well as ethnic upsurges are a part of life for the border region. Again, some are of the opinion that ethnic identity politics fashioned and patronised conflicts. For instance, Pakans, a conglomeration of Aimol, Anal, Lamkang, Moyon, Monsang, Tarao and Chothe tribes, who are inhabitants of Moreh, declared themselves to belong to the Kuki community. Earlier, they were in the Naga fold under the influence of a Naga armed group (NSCN-IM).[3] On the other hand, Aimol of Manipur tried to remain as Aimol and claimed to be neither Kuki nor Naga. But the dominance and arbitrary power of some larger groups also shapes ethnic identity formation. This kind of swing-identity could be seen in the border region.

Finally, it shows that the term Naga or Kuki is not a generic term, but a blanket term used by the then-colonial masters without understanding the diverse multiethnic populations of this region, in which India still acknowledges the colonial narratives. This kind of micro-ethnic-based categorisation simply undermined the composite Manipuri identity. Therefore, it is necessary to look critically on the evolution of the trans-

border ethnic communities in the process of development, and also the result and activity of the border population in the political affairs of the states.

Politics of migration

Movement of mankind on the earth has been a common phenomenon which is still faced by the world at large. The migration can be temporary, seasonal or recurrent, short or long, international or intra-national. Apart from the types and length of migration, a more analytically significant categorisation of human movement has been the understanding of the varied motives that explain the push and pull, as well as the consequent effects on the existing population and the environment due to influx. But in the context of the Indo-Myanmar borderland, the patterns and the factors of migration are somewhat different than the assumptions and happenings in other borderland areas, though the push and pull factors reflect the general movements of trans-border migration.

In Manipur, the historical incidence of recurrent movement through its eastern and western low mountain passes is popularly known as *nongpok haram* (for those waves of migration from the east) and *nongchup haram* (for those waves of migration from the west). This historical context of migration, as well as the influx of migrants across the international border, has inherently paved the way for a continuous trans-border movement, and it continues to date. Even though the quantum of trans-border migration cannot be measured quantitatively, due to the restrictions imposed by the government on fieldwork inside the border area, the fact that basic information is considered classified by the authorities (especially to researchers from the border region), lack of proper administration and the high sensitivity of the people on the issue, the exodus is, no doubt, certain and continuous.

The policy of the central government to develop border area along the Indo-Myanmar border has a positive implication for the welfare of the trans-border communities, yet it also encourages the influx of trans-border migration. The central government could establish new villages for new settlers along the adjacent border area. The crux of the problem is that these

trans-border migrants, because of sheer numbers, have managed to retain their ethnic greatness in number and could retain their ethnic identities and cause an upsurge in the ethnic rivalries among the trans-border communities. In the past, the migration was in the nature of mass movement, involving people as a whole or a section of them. In some cases, the migrating people evacuated their settlements due to aggression by more powerful neighbours, while others, who are migratory in character, used to move in search of a greener pastures. These people living on both sides of the border manage to outplay each other on the basis of their sheer largeness in number, and retain their ethnic majority status in the present-day democratic political system wherein number plays a vital role. Again, some are trying to earn profit in collaboration with powerful forces by exploiting rich mineral and other resources. Ultimately, ethnic conflict becomes ritualised during political elections and power distribution. Weiner (1978) pointed out that in a ‘multi-ethnic society conflicts stem not from inequality between ethnic groups but from competition for control over, or access to economic, political and social resources, power and status’ (Murayama 2006, 1354). This becomes an onerous addition and moral panic to the already trust-deficit-ridden pluralistic society.

It will not be untrue to say that the trans-border migration at the Indo-Myanmar border does not represent a completely homogenous character when we go deeper and look at the ground level. The heterogeneous character of these trans-border migrations cannot be explained only in the light of the presence of a political border that creates discontinuity in the landscape without serious consideration of the economic conditions of the peoples, since culture and trade are solely determined by the economy. At the macro level, the increasing population of trans-border migrants could be explained against the backdrop of different factors like war, natural calamities, religious freedom, political fragility, environmental degradation, ethnic rivalries, electoral politics, making profits out of grants and subsidies provided by the government, administrative flaws, etc.

A few landmark episodes would shed light on the understanding of the India-Myanmar borderland situation. For instance, from the time of the Taungoo dynasty, Myanmar and Manipur have come into contact. Through the centuries, there has been a natural exchange of people, goods and services between the two. In the modern context, the military coup of 1962, which implemented the policy of nationalisation of business and the

programme for Burmanisation, caused a large-scale exodus of the Indian community, thereby compelling a large section of them to take refuge and station themselves permanently at Moreh in Manipur. It was also the period when India was defeated by the Chinese in the Sino-Indian War of 1962. As a consequence of that war, a large number of Nepali migrants joined their former ethnic countrymen, resulting in the maximum expansion of the Nepali population at Moreh. We can also mention that the India-Nepal Treaty of Peace and Friendship, 1950, is also a factor in the increase of the Nepali population in the region. Thereafter, in the wake of the Bangladesh liberation movement of 1971–1972, a large population of people entered Northeast India illegally and reached Manipur.

Another dimension that make the population dynamics at Moreh more complicated is the exodus of the different ethnic groups from Mizoram and Nagaland, due to the counter-insurgency operations by the armed forces during the Naga hostile movement of the 1960s in Nagaland and the Mizo National Front movement of 1984–1985 in Mizoram. Even the Government of Manipur had officially given space for provisional settlement for the Mizo community during the movement. The Naga-Kuki clashes of Manipur in the 1990s also deepened the situation at Moreh through forced settlement of the displaced Kuki population, on the one hand, and a simultaneous dead fall in the Naga population, on the other. According to the *Reports of the Population of Manipur* published by the Directorate of Economics & Statistics, Government of Manipur (2006 & 2011), the decadal growth rate of Manipur, especially in the districts of Churachandpur and Chandel, is much higher than the state's average. This rapid growth of population could be due to the influx of migrants from the adjoining country, particularly the Chin state of Myanmar (Alana Golmei 2013).

The increase in the migrant population is also due to development projects. In India, especially in the Northeast, the Border Area Development Programme (BADP) is being executed by the Border Road Organization. A huge number of labourers stationed at the work-sites along with their families, especially at the border area, slowly win the heart of the tribal people through their pretended care and love. The Border Road Organization workers have married tribal women and developed a new colony in the border area. Like a new race under the nomenclature *Sumias* (Singh 2009) have emerged in Nagaland, a new race in the Indo-Myanmar border area could be formed in the coming years.

Development and connectivity

In the bygone days of the pre-colonial period, the region was an area where physical infrastructure and connectivity ‘within and without’ were in the state of a forgotten corner, and cultural connectivity was the prime mover. The importance of this region was not known until the process of liberalisation and India’s engagement with ASEAN was set. Connectivity in its different forms, like bilateral trade, border trade, medical treatment, tourism, etc., have increased day by day in the region. But in practice, especially in the border region, the kind of connectivity that India and Myanmar is projecting in the region is profit-oriented connectivity rooted deeply in economic and geo-strategic policy frameworks.

The real narrative of the national highway (no. 102), which connects with the Indo-Myanmar Friendship Road in Myanmar, is a story of paradox with the narratives expounded by the policy-makers. The measures taken to break the region’s isolation are countered by the ‘restricted connectivity’, and people’s participation is ‘carefully controlled’ (Duncan 2009). Again, the recent flood in Myanmar seriously affected the border region of Myanmar and India, especially the bridges and road, and these are still in dilapidated condition. The government of India had promised to reconstruct the road and the bridges which are lying across the Indo-Myanmar Friendship Road, but the progress of the work is very slow and there is no time bound for completion of the work.

There is talk about a ‘free movement regime’ of citizens belonging to Myanmar and India within 16km of the border. The Ministry of Home Affairs of India issued a notification in June 2018 in order to develop people-to-people connectivity. But the question arises – does it makes any sense when the basic needs of the people in the borderland are not addressed? We need to understand that ‘connectivity denotes community, commerce and cultures’ (Varghese 2008, 11). Seen in this light, at the core of the truly human conception of connectivity are both the notions of trade, tourism, connectivity, etc., and those of the hopes, futures, freedoms and entitlements of the people concerned and their culture. The kind of connectivity that solely centres around economic and politically motivated geo-strategic interests will fail to transform the region holistically in line with the wishes, hopes and futuristic imagination of the people, for this kind

of connectivity does not address the social epistemology of the people who have inhabited the borderland since time immemorial with their time-tested cultural capital.

Moreover, the developmental projects disrupted the ‘silenced life-world’ that connects space, people, society and culture, which ultimately compounded the widening of the gap between the border communities. In keeping with the above views, the idea for planning a new township (as coined by the then-Congress-led government) or smart city (coined by the present Indian government) at Moreh into a high-tech city may be extremely attractive for those who are in power. But without understanding the socio-economic conditions of this region, it will not benefit the border people who are struggling to survive hand-to-mouth. We also need to accept that developmental work is a political will; it ‘is not just growth [in economic sense], it should also encompass socio-political and cultural aspects with it’ (Naz 2006, 67). The juggernaut of the neoliberal economy will definitely impact the border population, though it may produce a few *nouveau riches*. The differences in terms of economic status cannot be ignored, since culture and trade is solely determined by the economy. The emerging issue related to the development agenda of Northeast India needs to be scrutinised before projecting the region as the national resources hub, so that the socio-cultural and economic lives of the people of this region could not be marginalised.

Livelihood and border trade

In the India-Myanmar borderland, particularly the region where Manipur and Sagaing region and Chin state share common borders, there are always social and economic contacts. The presence of the political border may be considered the main factor of discontinuity in the landscape, yet we need to see the different political systems at the border area and also the dualistic approaches of the trans-border communities.

The region is inhabited by different communities who exchange essential commodities of day-to-day life, especially those that are found abundantly on one side and scarcely on the other side, thereby developing a sort of economic symbiosis. There is a kind of socio-cultural mechanism of

accommodating the informal trade for their livelihood and welfare, and that mechanism reflects the universe of their relations. This is a fertile area of inquiry that the policy-makers and academicians both need to study, with the commitment of discovery and rediscovery of the nature of border-area trade.

It has been almost two decades since the border trade between India and Myanmar at Moreh-Tamu sector started. Formally, India notified 22 tradable items in 1995, again increased by another 18 items in 2008, and in 2012 another 22 items were added in the list. Now, there are altogether 62 items in the tradable list. Sesame and betel nuts are imported from Myanmar, and India exported wheat flour to Myanmar for about a decade; presently, the only item which is formally dealt with is betel nuts imported from Myanmar. But the sudden hike of customs duty from five percent to 40 percent as per notification (January 27, 2017), and the treatment of betel nut as a minor forest product instead of horticulture product by the government of Manipur, ultimately helped to stop the normal trade at the Moreh-Tamu sector. Such prescribed imposition and ‘structured tradable items’ cannot meet the demands of the border population, since the items are not reflected to the livelihood and their economy.

Again, who are the traders who are holding the Import-Export Code given by the Director General of Foreign Trade, Government of India and could do normal trade? Not a single local trader could be involved in the formal trade. This shows that the local traders are not able to participate in the process of economic engagement within the prescriptions prescribed by the government. Ultimately, the lever of economic power lies in the hands of the ‘outsiders’.

On the other hand, the local inhabitants have been engaging in small-scale and informal cross-border trade for their livelihood. Informal trade is their cultural apparatus for survival in the absence of other economic alternatives. Consequently, the use of the concepts of legality and illegality in the study of such border trade is not a natural feature, but the product of an ‘external labelling process’ through which the attribute of being legal or illegal is applied (Bruns and Miggelbrink 2012).

An immense array of micro-transactions for the satisfaction of daily needs in the spheres of supply, labour, health, leisure activities, education, etc., both at the personal and community levels of the border populations, could be seen in this border area. In spite of the fact that they speak

different languages and are affiliated with several religious and cultural traditions, they have had the experience of sharing their daily needs. This kind of symbiotic relationship between different ethno-linguistic groups could be considered an aspect of international diplomacy from the *emic* perspective.

Conclusion

The need of the hour is to understand the worldview of the people of this region: firstly, to comprehend how the historically different kinds of diverse elements are blended, and secondly, to know how the region has evolved from the combination of hills and plains into an organic body. Until and unless the government and the policy planners squarely dissect the problems of how the local people adapt and enhance their capability of accommodating themselves to the new geopolitical changes, the ultimate realisation of the opportunities of inter-connectivity and inter-regional cooperation in the perspective of the global process of change will remain hazy. This argument calls for deeper understanding of the fact that Northeast India and Northwest Myanmar are the conglomeration of thousands of ethnic communities, and that people's relationships and human geography, rather than the land or the territorial connectivity, are central to the collective transformation of the people. Any issues related to security and development should understand the region and its people from within, and the cartographic lenses should also be from the region's canvas. In short, a structural re-orientation of the Act East policy is of utmost importance while engaging with this borderland; if not, the policy will have little impact on this borderland.

Notes

1 Harsh V. Pant, 'Looking East and beyond', *The Telegraph*, August 30, 2014.

2 Downie Edmund, 'Manipur and India's "Act East" policy', *The Diplomat*, February 25, 2015.

3 See *People's Chronicle*, Imphal, July 28, 2014.

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12 The inner line permit paradox in India's Act East policy

C.V. Lalmalsawmi This chapter tries to bring forth the conspicuous paradox in India's Act East implementation of connectivity projects that aim to link the country's Northeast region with its eastern neighbours due to the existence of the inner line permit in some parts of the region. While the practice of the inner line permit as a colonial legacy evokes mixed sentiments, it continues to represent the protectionist discourse of a landlocked, backward and isolated region preoccupied with safeguarding their ethnic indigenous identities. This stems from the geo-strategic location of the Northeast, making it extremely vulnerable to infiltration from across the borders. New demands for the inner line permit should also be seen in this context. In exploring the inherent contradictions of development and the prevailing protectionism, the chapter argues for a sensitive, well-informed and balanced approach in dealing with these challenges.

Introduction

The practice of the inner line permit[1] in parts of Northeast India[2] has evoked various debates, movements and agitations in the past, with different contestations that either question or defend its relevance and applicability in the post-independence liberalisation period.[3] While much of the debates centred on whether the mechanism of the inner line permit is compatible with the constitutional guarantee of the fundamental right to 'freedom of movement' –although with reasonable restrictions –and the 'need' for its revocation as an 'archaic British-era regulation', it is in the non-inner line permit states in the Northeast, like Manipur, Meghalaya and Assam, where the most intense discussions regarding and demands for implementation of the same have taken place. Perhaps these can be best understood from the geographical standpoint of the Northeast itself, which

has induced permanent anxiety about being swamped by infiltrators and immigrants (both external and internal) since 98 percent of the region's borders correspond to international boundaries. However, attempts at introducing the permit system in these states have been met with scepticism by the government at the centre. In a federal set up, where the constitution provides for different subjects to fall under the respective jurisdiction of the centre and states, the regulation being an erstwhile colonial policy offers another potential source of friction in the centre-state relations wherein the centre is in a position to thwart such propositions. On the other hand, there is no coherence regarding the views about the implementation of the inner line permit in the Northeastern states. What is clear, though, is that the system is likely not revoked in places where it is already implemented due to two main reasons: firstly, there appears to be a preponderance of support for the mechanism as it exists among the locals, especially in the absence of adequate alternatives.[4] Secondly, the concept of the inner line permit itself is entrenched in the psyche of the hill tribes.

A rethinking of these debates needs to look at the inner line permit not only as a colonial institution retained to serve as a demarcation line between 'hills' and 'plains', or 'civilised' and 'tribals', but also in the context of the mainland-borderland divide which is an enduring legacy of the partition of the Indian sub-continent that rendered the Northeast region practically landlocked and inaccessible. The post-colonial Indian state's treatment of the region (Baruah 2005) also exacerbated the latter's political, cultural and economic isolation for a number of decades in the period after independence. This provides the scope to contextualise the Northeast region as a geopolitical entity at the cross-roads of India's burgeoning foreign policy engagement with its eastern and southeastern neighbours, underpinned by the Act East initiative. It also allows for envisioning the Northeast as a 'land bridge' connecting India and Southeast Asia via Myanmar, especially since bilateral relations between India and Myanmar have undergone constructive changes in the recent time.[5]

According to Merriam-Webster's dictionary, a paradox is defined as a 'tenet contrary to received opinion', while Cambridge English Dictionary defines it as 'a situation or statement that seems impossible or is difficult to understand because it contains two opposite facts or characteristics'. In the light of these definitions, the current chapter attempts to present the inner line permit as it exists today as a paradoxical element in the discourse of the

Act East policy vis-à-vis Northeast India, currently poised to be the gateway to Southeast Asia via Myanmar. The objective here is to bring the discussion of the inner line permit to the larger Act East narrative of connectivity and regional integration, and to give it an international dimension from a geopolitical and geostrategic perspective. It aims to juxtapose the much-hyped proposals for connectivity outlined in important policy documents like the North Eastern Region Vision 2020[6] with what Duncan Mc-Duie-Ra (2009) describes as the 'fear of connectivity' emanating from decades of alienation and the region's troubled history of insurgencies and counter-insurgencies that came to largely define Indian State-Northeast relations (Bhaumik 2009). In doing so, it argues that the continued existence of the inner line permit is one stark representation of such a fragile equation and hence needs to be factored in.

The new Act East paradigm

The pursuance of the Look East policy has undergone a paradigm shift with the transition into the newly invigorated Act East policy since 2014, paving the way for a more action-driven and result-oriented engagement with Southeast and East Asian countries. In fact, this transition can be attributed to India's desire to deepen and strengthen its burgeoning relationship with the Association for Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)[7] and the East Asian economies, and to accelerate the process of economic integration with the latter two. The objective of the Act East policy is also in tune with India's adoption of an extended neighbourhood concept going beyond the traditional South Asian region to include countries in the Far East, West Asia and South Pacific. As India strives for a greater strategic role in the Indo-Pacific region, strengthening its economic capabilities through increased regional integration has become an urgent priority. The new Act East paradigm stresses physical connectivity as the new phase of this policy for establishing closer trade, business and transport linkages, bringing in investments for economic development from the ASEAN region and for people-to-people contacts through a range of cultural, educational, professional and tourist exchanges. These objectives have also been actively

pursued through priority areas within sub-regional initiatives like the BIMSTEC,[8] BCIM Forum,[9] Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC) and other ASEAN-led institutional mechanisms and frameworks (Haokip 2012).

Since India is a continental and maritime neighbour to Myanmar, the only ASEAN country it shares land and sea borders with, there have been grand connectivity plans initiated to translate this physical proximity into synergies that mutually benefit both countries, especially the underdeveloped and landlocked borderland states in the Indo-Myanmar region.[10] Thus, the Indian government has undertaken ambitious construction programmes at the bilateral and multilateral levels, such as the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project to link Mizoram with the eastern seaport of Calcutta via the Sittwe port in Myanmar's Arakan state, the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway and the Trans-Asian Railways, as well as others. It is believed that the Kaladan project, upon completion, will provide an alternative 'strategic corridor' for India's Northeastern region, easing the 'strategic pressure' on the narrow Siliguri Corridor in West Bengal (YHome 2009, 22) that has been the only viable land-link between mainland India and the Northeast. However, there is also scepticism among local elites about the multi-million-dollar project regarding its potential adverse impact on the internal security situation in the otherwise peaceful state of Mizoram by facilitating the incoming and outgoing movement of 'undesirable elements' along with essential goods and services.[11]

As the Indo-Myanmar border is porous, it has enabled cross-border movements of militants, illegal arms and drugs, as well as other smuggling activities which had been acknowledged by the Indian Ministry of Home Affairs. The local Mizos are particularly apprehensive of rampant smuggling and supply of narcotics through the Mizoram-Chin state border, and the ease with which these have made inroads into various parts of Mizoram and the Northeast. The decline in the moral standard of the Mizo society is often claimed to have been triggered by widespread addiction and abuse of drugs and alcohol, especially among the unemployed youth, in spite of various measures undertaken by the law enforcement agencies and local NGOs to curb this. Although Mizos and Chins are considered to be ethnic and cultural surrogates, their relations have been hampered by the presence of a few recalcitrant elements among the latter, formerly believed

to be widely engaged in ‘illicit and untoward activities in Mizoram’.[12] This had caused tension and hostility at times and had even culminated into the Chins being served ‘Quit Mizoram’ notices by the Young Mizo Association (YMA) – the most powerful community-based NGO in Mizoram. Thus, Chin immigration[13] into the state, and their attempt at integration into their host society, have also been looked upon with suspicion as the Chin person is often dubbed as *Burma* Mi (a derogatory term meaning a Burmese/Myanmarese person) and, therefore, a foreigner. However, a clear-cut line is often hard to draw between ‘who is a Mizo’ and ‘who is a Chin’ due to their similarities in appearances, customs, language, religion and overlapping ethnic clan identities, as opposed to the easily identifiable Aryan- or Dravidian-looking immigrants.

The ‘Chin issue’ has to be located within the larger context of the growing insecurity against ‘foreigners’ that had gained momentum in the past decades in Assam and other parts of the Northeast. Whether it is the Chakma refugees from the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh who have settled down in Arunachal Pradesh, or the influx of Bangladeshi migrants into Assam that had caused strong anti-foreigner movements in the 1970s, the fear and paranoia over the continuous inflow of ‘ethnic outsiders’ into Northeastern states is unlikely to dissipate in the near future, given the current environment. Ironically, in the case of the Northeastern states, where the inner line permit is enforced, there have been reports of laxity in the ground-level enforcement as well as neglect by officials posted at the check gates, which often leads to acceptance of persons with dubious backgrounds or intentions into ‘protected areas’ without sufficient screening.

This also provides space for local vigilantism, as some pressure groups would occasionally carry out raids in search of inner line permit violators in their areas (Singh 2014). Sometimes, these groups also act in collaboration with security officials and are given free rein in assisting the latter. The recent introduction and passage of the Citizenship (Amendment) Bill, 2016 in Lok Sabha that shortens the naturalisation process of illegal immigrants belonging to ‘persecuted minorities’ from nearby countries like Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan has caused furor among local communities, student and civil society organisations in the Northeast. If implemented, it will effectively grant citizenship to a large number of illegal settlers in these states.[14] These undercurrents have posed a counter-

narrative to the Act East policy of bringing about Northeast-mainland integration and people-to-people contact through increased tourism and better transport linkages.

Unveiling the paradoxes

The implementation of the Act East policy so as to generate economic growth and development in the Northeast requires, by default, the opening up of the sensitive borders of erstwhile ‘protected hill states’ in the Indo-Myanmar region. The protectionism or enslavement of tribal-dominated hill areas in the Northeast as distinct cultural, traditional and economic units finds its roots in the colonial-era Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation, 1873 that effectively delimited inner lines or internal boundaries for these areas, rendering them insular and isolated from mainland legislation and intervention (Kikhi 2018). The 1873 Regulation was framed at a time when much of the Northeast still did not come under the administrative jurisdiction of the erstwhile Assam and Bengal and was largely considered a frontier land inhabited by backward tribes.

What was largely known as the Northeast frontier lies east of West Bengal, and the 1873 Regulation initially covered the districts of Cachar, Darrang, Kamrup, Khasi and Jaintia Hills, Lakhimpur, Naga Hills, Nowgong and Sibsagar. Later via the Scheduled Districts Act, 1874, the Eastern Duars in the Goalpara district, the Mokokchung subdivision of the Naga Hills, the Sadiya Frontier Tract, the Balipara Frontier Tract, the Lakhimpur Frontier Tract and the Lushai Hills district also came under its coverage.[15] The draft Regulation, after various deliberations and certain amendments, was approved by the Governor General in Council and initially published in the Gazette of India by Notification no. 139R dated August 5, 1873.[16] This was cancelled and re-published as Notification 189R October 2, 1873, which came to be commonly known as The Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation, 1873 (Regulation V of 1873) or simply the inner line permit. Section 2 of the Regulation V Preamble reads: It shall be lawful for the [State Government] to prescribe and from time to time alter by notification in the [Official Gazette], a line to be called ‘The Inner Line’

in [the above-named districts]. The [State Government] may by notification in the (Official Gazette) prohibit all [citizens of India or any class of such citizens] or any persons residing in or passing through such districts from going beyond such line without a pass under the hand and seal of the chief executive officer of such district or of such other officer as he may authorize to grant such pass; and the [State Government] may, from time to time, cancel or vary such prohibition.

The regulation provides for a penalty for violating the above Section by either fine or imprisonment by the Magistrate as may be decided by him/her accordingly. Prohibition for acquiring any interest in land or product of land by non-native persons beyond the 'inner lines' without the due sanction of the state government is also spelt out in Section 7. It should be pointed out here that the concept of 'inner line' was conceived long before these hill tracts were declared 'Excluded Areas' and 'Partially Excluded Areas' under the Government of India Act 1935, a consequence of the 'profusion of boundaries and fine mapping names of the colonial era'(Zou 2011, 20). Designating these areas as 'excluded' and 'partially excluded' meant that the provincial laws or the elected ministers had either little or no jurisdiction over them, and were directly placed under the Governor. The terms adopted in the Government of India (Excluded and Partially Excluded Areas) Order 1936 simply replaced the previous connotation of the 'Backward Tracts', which form a contiguous block on the borders of and within Assam itself, unlike pockets of excluded areas in other parts of India (Reid 1944). This has the imperial effect of isolating the hills from the plains even before they were incorporated formally (albeit not fully) into the administrative structures of British India. In fact, a principle of 'minimum interference' had been adopted towards the hill areas of Assam for purposes of efficient and peaceful governance.

Such policy orientation appears to affirm the logic that the colonial masters themselves were convinced of the absence of racial, historical, cultural and linguistic affinities between so-called 'India proper' and the 'marked areas' that it befitted coining the aforementioned 'legislative phrases' to distinguish between the two for the sake of administrative conveniences (Reid 1944 3). Peter Robb argues that the inner line was part of the British border strategy, drawn to separate tribal areas from Assam proper, with permanent outposts spaced out along the border guarded and

patrolled by security personnel so as to demarcate British territory clearly and to make the colonial government more visible to people within the borders (Robb 1997). After independence, the inner line permit regulation was adopted under the Adaptation of Laws Order, 1950 and again under the North-Eastern Areas (Reorganization) Act, 1971.[17]

Thus, although it appears to serve as a mere travel permit in the current context, the inner line permit in its initial condition was envisaged in such a way that it had a much larger impact on the daily interactions and functioning –administrative, social, cultural and economic –of the communities in the Northeast frontier, creating the exclusive categories of 'hills' and 'plains', 'tribals' and 'non-tribals' and, most importantly, 'indigenous' and 'outsiders' (Pachuau 2014). Notably, the Regulation continues to be in force in the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram and Nagaland (excluding Dimapur city) bordering Myanmar along the total of the 1,643-km international boundary which was first officially demarcated in 1967. However, the legislation is not currently operational in two other Northeast states with significant tribal populations –Manipur and Meghalaya –despite longstanding demands to implement similar legislation in these states. The Regulation was withdrawn from the Garo Hills district by the Repealing Act, 1897[18] and only applicable to the British-administered Khasi and Jaintia Hills, where 'it can no longer be enforced' due to legal complications, since Meghalaya attained full statehood in 1972.[19]

With regard to Manipur, where the inner line permit was in vogue until 1950, when it was revoked by the then Commissioner of Assam,[20] there have been consistent efforts by the majority Meitei populace to reintroduce it. The issue became politically charged when three Bills were passed by the state's legislative assembly that proved to be highly contentious, resulting in violent protests among the tribals within the state. The passage of the three Bills, viz., The Protection of the Manipur Peoples Bill 2015, The Manipur Land Revenue and Land Reforms (7th Amendment) Bill 2015 and The Manipur Shops and Establishment (2nd Amendment) Bill in 2015, drew the ire of tribal groups who contended that several clauses of the Bills were deliberately designed so as to harm the rights and interests of the hill residents in Manipur, and were therefore unacceptable. Another contributing factor to the outbursts could have been the failure to include

the Hills Advisory Council (HAC) in the deliberation process. While the Meitei-led Joint Committee on the Inner Line Permit System (JCILPS) spearheaded the movement for reviving the inner line permit, a counter-movement in the tribal-dominated areas was carried out in full swing, thereby cementing the existing binary between hills and plains in an ethnically divided Manipur.

The demand for reinstatement of the inner line permit in Manipur appears to stem from the apprehension of 'outsiders' or 'non-Manipuris', also locally labelled 'Mayangs' (Roluahpuia 2017), which is a recurrent theme in the case of similar demands in Meghalaya and Assam. However, the demands by pressure groups and political parties for the re-enforcement of the Regulation in Meghalaya had been relatively peaceful in their articulation. Various opposing views that have since emerged regarding implementation of the Regulation have also thrown light on the complex and archaic nature of the Regulation and the legal difficulty in expanding such special provisions to new areas, as the Constitution does not provide for it. As a matter of fact, the idea of enforcing protectionist mechanisms such as the inner line may not be welcomed by all parties, as it is considered regressive and in violation of the fundamental right of a bona fide Indian citizen to move freely throughout the country as provided by Article 19 (1) (a) of the constitution.[21] Some may also argue that the relative 'cosmopolitan nature' of Meghalaya, as compared to the 'demographically pristine' Mizoram or Arunachal Pradesh, as a former British outpost and its hospitable climate for accommodating different cultures and peoples make it an unlikely candidate for the inner line permit.[22] Besides, the centre clearly has no plans to bring back the inner line permit in the Northeast states except for those wherein it is currently operative, and no such demands have been approved by the central government to date.

The extent to which the inner line stands as an obstacle to growth and development activities in a particular state continues to be a matter of debate, as no exact estimates are available to date. Moreover, looking at cases like the Wokha and Dimapur districts of Nagaland where population growth has been dramatically high in the past decades,[23] its effectiveness in preventing and offsetting unwanted inflows of immigrants may well be questioned. Although this could depend a great deal on the degree of commitment of relevant authorities in the concerned state, it nevertheless

reveals the flaws in the inner line permit system and the technical challenges of strict enforcement of the regulation. Thus, not so much the legal authorisation of the inner pass itself (which is easily available and in some cases a mere formality), but the palpable sense of the need to continue in any manner such special licenses for certain areas (read states) where it is being implemented, is a point worth considering.

It is safe to argue that none of the states where the inner line permit is not officially enforced will open their doors freely to non-tribals or ‘ethnic outsiders’, either from other Indian states or abroad, especially with the intention of doing business or acquiring land and other properties. However, in the absence of any effective mechanism, one can cite the case of Tripura, where the indigenous tribals have been rendered minorities in their own land by the immigrant Bengali-speaking population who are now politically in charge of the state. The Indigenous Peoples’ Front of Tripura (IPFT) had also made similar demands for promulgation of the inner line permit in the Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council (TTAAC), but to no avail; both the centre and state governments rejected it, arguing, rather ironically, that existing tribal laws are sufficient to protect the interests and welfare of the tribal population in the state. Such demands are also often seen to be divisive and inimical to equitable development, as they restrict free movement and interaction between ‘enforced areas’ and ‘non-enforced areas’.

In the context of the above discussions, this chapter tries to bring forth the following central arguments about the inherent contradictions in the Act East scheme pertaining to the inner line permit:

I. First, and broadly speaking, the ‘gateway proposition’ of Act East places the erstwhile isolated and neglected Northeast at the centre stage of the country’s eastward diplomacy to bring about much-needed progress and prosperity.[24] This is seen as ‘the way out’, a panacea of sorts for a region encumbered with long-standing militancies, poverty and infrastructure deficiency. The proposed connectivity routes and linkages aim to capitalise on the region’s ‘trans-national frontier nature’ in order to transform it into an economic and trade corridor for the dual objectives of sub-regional integration and for mainland-borderland integration (Haokip 2015). While well-intentioned, the region’s complexities, peculiarities and concerns of each individual

state tend to be overlooked, or rather over-simplified, in the discourse of policymaking in favour of foreign policy rhetorics that often fail to bring concrete results on the ground. An example can be cited of the 2004 and 2014 India-ASEAN Car Rallies, which launched with much fanfare to showcase the physical proximity between India's Northeast and ASEAN region but failed to produce tangible follow-up results. As Duie-Ra (2009, 315) eloquently puts it, the 'big development approach' adopted in the North Eastern Region Vision 2020 'has drawn vehement opposition at the local level as it exacerbates the image of a paternal, controlling and overbearing state taking resources and land from ethnically defined and largely autonomous homelands.'

II. Second, there remains a strong and pervasive 'inner line mentality' in the Northeast that contradicts the very idea of an open border with little or no restriction on the flow of goods, people and services. This has to be linked with the explosive and recurrent issue of illegal immigration among the Northeast states, particularly in Assam. The continuous and unabated infiltration from across the borders[25] has given rise to antagonistic sentiments often culminating into 'xenophobia' towards those perceived as outsiders, including Bangladeshi Muslim immigrants in these states (Khongreiwo 2009). This can be seen as mainly induced by 'ethnic security anxieties' prevailing in the region, which increasingly perceives immigrants as posing security threats to the socio-cultural existence and livelihoods of local communities (Baruah 2008). In case of Mizoram, non-state actors in the form of community and student-based NGOs such as YMA and MZP have been actively involved in conducting inner line permit campaigns –the occasional and random large-scale checking of inner line documents from resident plainsmen, also referred to as *Vai* by the Mizos, in an effort to nab defaulters –often in the absence of effective government monitoring and perceived indifference from the state's political leadership. Many of these so-called *Vai* who are small traders, carpenters and labourers make their way into Mizoram from the adjacent Barak valley districts of Hailakandi, Cachar and Karimganj in Assam, which are well-known for their swelling immigrant population from Bangladesh. Given this situation, it is interesting to see how major connectivity schemes like the Kaladan project, which aims to connect the Chittagong Port with India's

Northeast, would play out given the high stakes involved. Here, Northeast-Myanmar-Bangladesh should be seen as one continuum due to their geographic contiguity, and any plan involving one region will automatically affect the others. While fencing of the Indo-Bangladesh border has been successfully carried out by popular demand, the same could not be done along the Indo-Myanmar border due to fierce protests by the Nagas and Kukis living in villages at the boundary intersections. These communities are wary of losing their ancestral lands in the fencing process, and are also worried about being cut off from their age-old traditional ties and their access to their means of livelihood across the border.

III. Third, the ‘dual practice’ of the inner line permit to bar entry of Indian citizens into the ethnic border states and the facilitation of a Free Movement Regime (FMR)[26] that allows ‘foreigners’ to cross the Indo-Myanmar border without visas also constitutes a paradox from the Act East perspective of national integration. The former finds justification on the grounds of ‘uniqueness’ of these scheduled states from the rest of India, while that of the latter stems from the ethno-racial bonds and territorial contiguity shared by communities on either side of the border.[27] But such regime implementation also raises questions as to what degree the special constitutional safeguards[28] currently enjoyed by these states will remain effective, and whether the very rationale of the inner line permit will be rendered meaningless in the event of massive influx of international tourists and immigrants from the neighbouring countries. Thus, the Act East strategy of regional engagement is essentially putting forth India’s ‘most vulnerable communities’ to be in direct contact with the more prosperous, advanced and relatively developed societies of Southeast and East Asia in order to realise the underlined objectives of connectivity.

The inner line permit paradox and the way forward

One needs to understand that central to the inner line permit issue is the threat (both perceived and real) to the identity and culture of indigenous communities inhabiting these borderland states. The inner line regime is largely seen as a potent instrument to safeguard their cultural, traditional and customary existence and practices against any outside interference, intrusion, inundation and/ or assimilation (Pachuau 2014). Here, the changing circumstances and the need to attract tourists and migrant workers for boosting local economies may not be overlooked. The Chins, for example, have contributed to the economy of Mizoram by providing the cheap and resilient workforce to the labour market and other services (Human Rights Law Network 2005). In fact, many small traders and entrepreneurs in Champhai or Aizawl are of Chin ethnic origin and have permanently settled or are temporarily residing in Mizoram. The bigger concern for Mizos may potentially be the steady inflow of working-class immigrants, traders and businessmen from neighbouring Assam, due to the latter's sheer proximity to Mizoram and its peaceful environment making it a favoured destination. These non-tribal immigrants are becoming more visible in local markets across the state, as they own retail shops (often using Mizo names as proprietors), run their own businesses and in some cases marry local women, purportedly to consolidate themselves. Such incidences of marriages outside of one's tribal community, on the part of tribal women, are negatively viewed by the Mizo public and repeatedly discouraged by pressure groups like the Central Young Mizo Association (CYMA) through various methods, including the launching of traditional 'kumpuan' or 'annual campaigns' often directed towards the protection of Mizo culture and identity.[29] The competition created by their presence is also felt by Mizo traders, further fuelling anti-*Vai* sentiments being displayed, as seen in the recent protests by the Mizo Merchants Association (MIMER) against the launching of Vishal Mega Mart in Aizawl.[30]

In fairness, the border livelihoods of these regions are deeply and organically intertwined and cannot be taken in isolation. However, there are immediate challenges that need to be addressed before the border check-gates are flooded with new waves of immigrants, such as bad governance and rampant corruption by the political elites and bureaucrats that have created deep schisms between the common men and the privileged sections in the Northeast societies. In such a situation, it is crucial to include all relevant stakeholders down to the grassroots level in order to build mutual

trust and cooperation through open dialogues and confidence-building measures. Civil society groups can play a significant mediating role in the consultation and decision-making processes of development activities. In addition, better and more efficient arrangements are required for monitoring non-traditional security issues emanating from both domestic and international borders in tandem with local sensibilities and aspirations. The international border control system also needs to take into account the existing cross-border ties and linkages that thrive on free and easy mobility based on bilateral understandings and goodwill. That being said, the unique Free Movement Regime mechanism needs to be closely scrutinised, as it has been constantly misused by militants, drug peddlers, smugglers and criminals who freely traverse these areas, taking advantage of the relaxed norms in security checking (Press Information Bureau 2017).

The ongoing development initiatives like the introduction of passenger train services in Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram have evoked mixed responses in both the states, despite the urgent need for better transport infrastructure. In neighbouring Meghalaya, the issue of construction of railways into the Khasi Hills has been championed by the Khasi Students' Union (KSU) and is linked with inner line permit demands (Hasan 2018). It is interesting to note that while the official narrative of the state appears to be in favour of such constructions, the government has to relent to the demands of the indigenous communities for halting the project (Hasan 2018). The railway services in Arunachal Pradesh were suspended in 2014 after serious concerns were raised by the student organisations, along with other civil society organisations, over the state government's failure of issuing inner line permit to the rail passengers (Gao 2015). The development was also seen as an underhand move by the central government to do away with the inner line permit, prompting immense protests in the state (Gao 2015).

Recently, the Chief Minister of Arunachal Pradesh Pema Khandu, in a complete reversal of the central government's position on the citizenship status of Chakma-Hajongs, invoked the special protection status of the state under the constitution, the sanctity of the inner line permit which is in vogue and the inviolability of the privileges granted to the same.[31] Interestingly, in the case of Mizoram, a separate inner line permit clause was inserted into the agreement signed between the Indian government and the militant Mizo National Front (MNF) to ensure its continued use in the

state.[32] The MNF leader and ex-Chief Minister of Mizoram Pu Zoramthanga commented that ‘this serves as the outermost ring in the defence system of the state against all forms of infringement on the indigenous culture, religion and customary laws by external forces’ (Zoramthanga 2016).

Conclusion

The implementation of the inner line permit, in itself, need not be an obstacle to what is termed a ‘connectivity-led development’ within the Northeast region, especially in its remote rural and border areas. By clearly defining the ambit of the inner line permit and laying out its current intention, which is to help ensure the preservation of the culture, land and identity of the concerned hill tribes from external interferences, the continued use of this mechanism appears justified. The challenge before the Indian state is finding ways and means to negotiate between the contradictory visions of development espoused by its agents, like the Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region, and the local people to arrive at a comprehensive plan of action for the future. With the implementation of various infrastructure projects – from roadways and railways to inland waterways –the Northeast states of India are poised to be better linked with each other as well as with the rest of the country, enabling better flow of investments, trade, labour and capital. Thus, apprehensions and concerns about the consequences of such emerging scenarios are bound to follow. The dissenting voices and alternate views must be situated in their varied contexts and accommodated within the larger development discourse. This will be the real test for the North Eastern Region Vision 2020’s blueprint for inclusive and sustainable growth. As rightly argued by Salvin Paul and Debashis Nath, ‘no development scheme targeting the people of Northeast can have a long term impact provided it fails to address the dominant protectionist discourse of the region’ (Paul and Nath 2017, 12). There need to be a rigorous multi-tiered engagement between the policymakers, on the one hand, and state governments, local NGOs and civil society groups representing various interests, on the other, to build a long-lasting mutual trust and understanding and to make the latter full

partners and active participants in the Act East deliberations and processes. Lastly, the peculiar formation of the Northeast states and their unique demographic and socio-economic composition had necessitated special safeguards, such as the inner line permit, that need to be taken into consideration for the successful and harmonious realisation of the gateway proposition of Act East policy. This requires a balanced, sensitive and well-informed approach to the nature and debates surrounding such regulations so as not to alienate the region's population further, but to effectively reconcile the diverse objectives and initiatives of the policy with the needs and aspirations of local communities in the Northeast states who are the most important beneficiaries.

Notes

1 The inner line permit is an official travel pass required by domestic travellers for entry and limited stay in the Northeast Indian states of Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram and Nagaland and issued by government authorities in each of these states. See *Inner Line Permit*, Ministry of Development of Northeastern Region, Government of India. For a detailed analysis, see Paul, Salvin and Nath, Debashis (2017, 323–345).

2 The term 'Northeast' used to indicate the colonial province of Assam and the princely states of Manipur and Tripura, which the British referred to as The Eastern Frontier of Bengal or simply the Northeast Frontier. After independence, the term gained in popularity and became official with the creation of the North Eastern Council in 1971 and formation of new federal states. The present-day Northeast consists of eight states, viz., Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura.

3 See Patricia Mukhim, 'ILP- confusion worst confounded', *The Shillong Times*, December 20, 2013.

4 Shrishti Pukhrem, 'The significance of connectivity in India-Myanmar relations', *IDSA Comment*, July 6, 2012.

5 Mention should be made here of the state visit of India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Myanmar in September 2017, wherein 11 agreements were signed and both sides 'pledged to further deepen and broaden bilateral relations for the mutual benefit of the people of both countries'. See Ministry of External Affairs. 2017. 'India-Myanmar Joint Statement issued on the occasion of the State Visit of Prime Minister of India to Myanmar', *Media Center*. New Delhi: Ministry of External Affairs. September 5–7.

6 The North Eastern Region Vision 2020 document, including the Vision 2020 statement, was adopted at the North Eastern Council's 56th Plenary Session held at Agartala (capital of Tripura) in 2008 and unveiled by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh on 2 July 2008 in New Delhi. According to McDuie-Ra, the Vision is the first attempt at evolving a 'comprehensive policy agenda' for achieving 'peace and prosperity' in the region. See McDuie-Ra, Duncan (2009, 313–330).

7 The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is a ten-member regional grouping that came into existence as a result of the Bangkok Declaration in 1967 with Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore and Thailand as its original members. The Philippines, Brunei, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar joined in the subsequent years.

8 The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) is a sub-regional cooperation consisting of India, Myanmar, Thailand, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka established in 1997.

9 The Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) Forum for Regional Cooperation, previously known as the Kunming Initiative, is an Asian sub-regional cooperation for greater integration of trade and investment among the four member countries.

10 Note that this has been the official discourse so far.

11 Rahul Karmakar, 'Mizoram anticipating security problems post-Kaladan', *The Hindustan Times*, February 2, 2011.

12 For example, the highly controversial and contentious business of brewing local alcohol during the implementation period of the Mizoram Liquor Total Prohibition (MLTP) Act 1995 has been understood to be monopolised by recalcitrant groups residing in certain localities notorious for such a 'business' viz., Rangvamual and Phunchawng in Aizawl, which are predominantly inhabited by Chin immigrants from Myanmar.

13 Chins of Myanmar who enter Mizoram do so mainly for two reasons: firstly, as political refugees fleeing political and ethnic persecution in the country, especially during the 1990s; and secondly, as economic immigrants seeking livelihood opportunities, primarily in the unorganised sector. However, in the present scenario, the thriving legal and illegal cross-border trade appears to be the main driver of immigration – including both permanent and temporary settlement – into Mizoram.

14 The opposition to the proposed Bill that seeks to amend the Citizenship Act, 1955 and is widely perceived as detrimental to indigenous interests is not confined within the Northeast region alone and should be situated in its political context as well. However, the Northeast states dealing with heavy immigration from across the borders take the most offense to it, due to their serious concern that they would be the 'first victims' of the new amendment which could potentially upset the region's demographic balance in the latter's favour.

15 Eastern Frontier, Annexure III, Part III, Regulation 5 of 1873.

16 Ranjit M. Singh, 'History of inner line permit system', *The Sangai Express*, October 10, 2016.

17 Morning Star Sumer, 'Meghalaya, with or without ILP?' *The Shillong Times*, August 30, 2012.

18 Morning Star Sumer, 'ILP: Meghalaya's HLC's vis-à-vis regulation's of 1873', *Meghalaya Times*, (n.d.). Retrieved from http://meghalayatimes.info/index.php/writer-s-column/17233-ilp-meghalaya-hlc-s-vis-a-vis-regulation-s-of-1873.

19 See Febela Dr Adv. Nonglait, 'Inner line permit: A legal paradox', *Meghalaya Times*, (n.d.). Retrieved from http://meghalayatimes.info/index.php/writer-s-column/21994-inner-line-permit-a-legal-paradox.

20 Nehginpao Kipgen, 'The fractious demand for ILP in Manipur', *The Hindu*, August 27, 2015.

21 See Patricia Mukhim, 'ILP- confusion worst confounded', *The Shillong Times*, December 20, 2013.

22 See Patricia Mukhim, 'Is ILP the solution to the influx dilemma?' *The Shillong Times*, August 24, 2012.

23 This is discussed by Singh (2009).

24 Here I refer to ‘The Northeastern Region Vision 2020 Document’. See NEC and MDONER (2008).

25 India’s Northeast region shares roughly 5,300 km of boundaries with Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Myanmar and China, of which only a few kilometres are fenced for security reasons.

26 The Visa-Free Movement Regime allows for free movement of people within 16 km along the shared border between India and Myanmar. So far, proposals by Indian government to streamline FMR by issuing valid border passes for security purposes have been deferred by the Myanmar government due to unspecific domestic reasons.

27 In this regard, an Agreement on Land Border Crossing between India and Myanmar was approved by the Indian Government on 3 January 2018 ‘to facilitate regulation and harmonization of already existing free movement rights for people ordinarily residing in the border areas of both countries’. See Press Information Bureau (2018).

28 Read Article 371 Special Provisions with respect to Northeast States in the Indian Constitution.

29 For example, the 2018 CYMA Kumpuan is ‘Ram leh Hnam Humhalh’ (protection of land and culture) wherein the CYMA pressures the state government to pass the ‘Social Custom Bill’ that aims to curb the rate of intermarriage between Mizo women and non-tribal (read ‘Vai’) men. If passed, a Mizo woman will lose her tribal status if she marries a non-tribal man. See ‘YMA Rorel Inkhawm Vawi 2-na neih a ni. YMA in Mizoramah NCR tih ve an duh’ (YMA’s 2nd General Assembly held. YMA wants to implement NRC in Mizoram), Vanglaini, 20 October 2018, Aizawl, retrieved from www.vanglaini.org/tualchhung/90386.

30 Newmai News Network, ‘Mizo Merchant Body protests opening of Vishal Mega Mart’, *The Morung Express*, March 26, 2018.

31 Samudra Gupta Kashyap, ‘Not ready to accept citizenship for Chakmas, Hajongs: Arunachal Pradesh CM’, *The Indian Express*, September 19, 2017.

32 The Memorandum of Settlement (Mizoram Accord) was signed on 30 June 1986 after 20 years of MNF-led independent movement against the Indian state, and Mizoram was given full statehood in 1987.

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